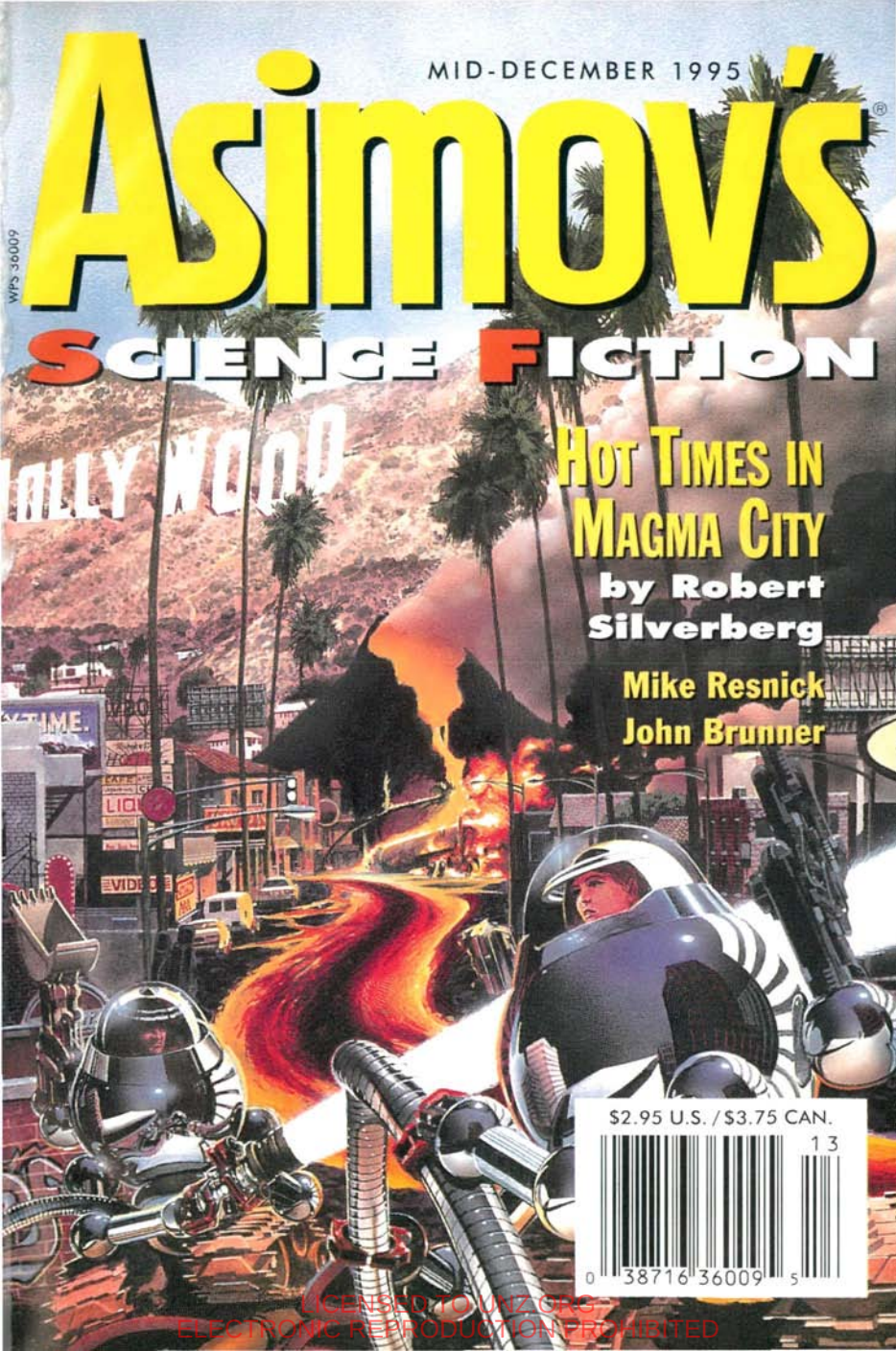

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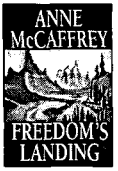

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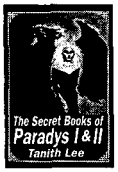

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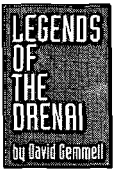

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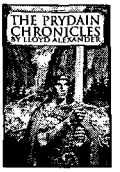

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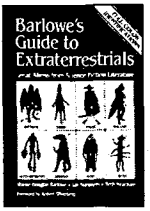

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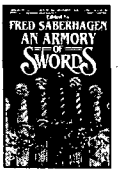

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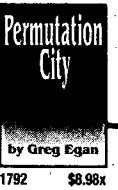

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Asimov's
SCIENCE FICTION

Vol. 19 No. 15 (Whole Number 240) Mid-December 1995
Next Issue on Sale December 5, 1995

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Gardner Dozois: Editor — Sheila Williams: Executive Editor
Carla Graubard: President & Publisher — Terri Czeczko: Art Director

Stories from *Asimov's* have won twenty-four Hugos and twenty-one Nebula Awards, and our editors have received ten Hugo Awards for Best Editor. *Asimov's* was also the 1994 recipient of the *Locus* Award for Best Magazine.

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

OLD ENOUGH TO VOTE

I have here before me the brand new 18th Anniversary Issue of this sterling magazine, dated April 1995. (It won't be brand new when you get to read this column next autumn, of course. But we are an old-fashioned linear print medium and it takes a certain amount of time for the work of the contributors to make the journey from the word-processor stage to the typesetting stage to the printed-and-bound-and-distributed stage. So I operate three to five months ahead of time.)

This is going to sound pretty strange, I know, but it came as a surprise to me that *Asimov's Science Fiction* was eighteen years old already. Eighteen years is a respectable and considerable span of time. An American citizen who has lived eighteen years is old enough to drink alcoholic beverages legally (in some parts of the country, that is), old enough to get married, old enough to vote. By the time I was eighteen, I was old enough not only to have written some science fiction stories but to have had people actually pay me money for the privilege of publishing them. Eighteen is, at least in a technical sense, the very threshold of maturity.

And yet I still think of *Asimov's* as a *new* science fiction magazine. If you had asked me to tell you, without stopping to count on my fingers, how old I thought the magazine was, I probably would have said twelve, thirteen, maybe fourteen. Certainly not eighteen.

What's my idea of an *old* science fiction magazine?

An old science fiction magazine, to me, is any magazine that was in business before I began reading science fiction magazines in 1948. (This is known as Silverberg's Principle of Subjectivity.) *Amazing Stories* is an old science fiction magazine: it had already been in business for twenty-two years before I stumbled on my first copy. *Analog* is an old science fiction magazine, although we called it *Astounding* when I began buying it almost half a century ago. I will grudgingly concede that *Fantasy & Science Fiction* is an old science fiction magazine, even though I can clearly remember the day its first issue came out, in the autumn of 1949. Technically it violates my Principle of Subjectivity, since I've been around in this field longer than it has, but I will accept it as the venerable thing it really is, considering that it has lasted forty-six years so far, and is in fact older than its own current editor by quite a bit.

But *Asimov's? Asimov's?* A mere

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stripling among magazines. The new kid on the block, so far as I'm concerned. And yet it says right here on the contents page of the 18th Anniversary Issue that this is issue number 229-230. That's a lot of issues for a monthly magazine, even if you take into account the fact that *Asimov's* comes out slightly more often than monthly, and even if you allow for some of the fudging of the record that this hyphenated double-issue-numbering stuff occasionally creates.

All right, Gardner, all right, Sheila: I concede the point. *Asimov's*, which is older than a lot of its readers and (for all I know) some of its contributors, is now a distinguished senior figure in the field of science fiction magazines. The fact that there are hardly any magazines in the field that are younger than *Asimov's* is no reflection on its maturity; it's just that people don't seem to be starting new science fiction magazines very often these days, and when they do, they don't quite fit the definition of "science fiction magazine" that held true in the ancient days of *Thrilling Wonder Stories* and *Super Science Stories*. (Is *Omni* a science fiction magazine? Hardly, though it does publish an SF story every issue. Does *Science Fiction Age* qualify? Well, yes and no, since it's a magazine *about* science fiction combined with a magazine of science fiction. And what about *Galaxy*, which has a truly lengthy lineage going back forty-five years, but which was out of business for about twenty of those years before being revived by the son of its orig-

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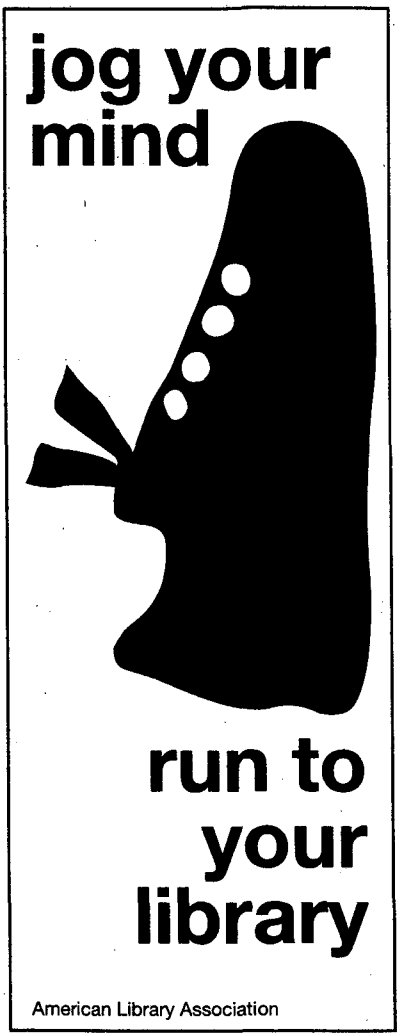
inal editor just a couple of years ago?)

At any rate, be assured that you currently hold in your hands not only one of the best science fiction magazines ever published, but also one of the longest lived. Two hundred twenty-nine issues, or two hundred thirty, or however many the *real* number is when you quit fooling around with those contents-page hyphens, is not exactly an ephemeral total.

One interesting thing to me, as I compare the current issue with my antique copy of Volume One, Number One (after blowing away eighteen years of dust, of course) is how different in many respects the two issues are, and yet how similar they are in basic essentials.

The format is pretty much the same. Issue #1 has 192 pages and Issue #229-230 has 320, but that's just a fluke. #229-230 is one of the twice-yearly double issues that we do; the normal length of the magazine is 176 pages, close enough to the original 192, especially when you consider that the type size of the current magazine is smaller than it used to be and so you get more material per issue than in the past.

Of course, you pay a little more, too. The Spring 1977 issue (*Asimov's* was a quarterly at the outset, dating according to the seasons) would have cost you $1; the price tag on a regular-size issue these days is $2.95, and a double issue like the 18th Anniversary Issue will set you back $4.50. But when we factor in the effects of eighteen years of inflation we find that the relative purchasing power of $1 in 1977 and $2.95 today is pretty much the same, using Sil-



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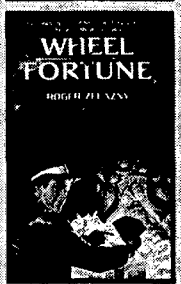

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verberg's Hot Dog Rule, which extrapolates from the price of wieners at your corner stand to demonstrate the changing value of your buck over the centuries. (Hot dogs cost 10 cents apiece when I first began buying them around 1945, by which I conclude that the price of everything has increased roughly thirty-fold in fifty years. On the other hand, SF magazines in 1945 cost 25 cents each, which makes them terrific bargains today, when their 1995 price is recalculated in 1945 hot-dog money.)

The page size of *Asimov's* #1 is nearly identical to that of *Asimov's* #229-230. Superficially, the two magazines look a lot like each other. But a closer investigation reveals all sorts of alterations over that immense span of eighteen years.

The name of the magazine itself has changed, for example. It was *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* originally, a moniker that is splashed over a full third of the first cover in conspicuous yellow lettering on a red background. But several years ago—Sheila Williams could tell you exactly when, and why—the more concise *Asimov's Science Fiction* became the official name of this splendid publication. The cover logo, which has been redesigned several times over the years, is now much less splashy than it was at first, although, as you may observe, it is not exactly subtle. (The logo of a magazine is the front-cover design that announces the name of the magazine, and magazines that go in for subtle-looking logos tend not to survive a great many years.)

So the price of the magazine has changed (at least in absolute dollars) and the number of pages has changed (a little bit) and the magazine's name has been slightly tinkered with. *So has the staff.* Not a single name found on the masthead of Issue #1 can be seen on that of #229-230, with one minor exception and one major but lamentable one. George H. Scithers was the editor at the beginning; Kathleen Moloney and Shawna McCarthy briefly succeeded him, but for the past decade or so it has been Gardner Dozois who sits firmly in the editorial chair. (He is the minor exception to the everything-has-changed rule. Gardner was associate editor in 1977, and now is editor; but his tenure hasn't been continuous, since he left the magazine after its first year of publication and didn't return to its masthead until the January 1986 issue, when he had taken over the top editorial job. Joel Davis was the publisher, then; but Davis Publications sold the magazine, five or six years ago, to the Bertelsmann publishing group of Germany, and the woman currently listed as publisher is Carla Graubard who is the head of the Dell Magazines division of the vast Bertelsmann empire. Carl Bartee was the production director back in the early days; Sheila Williams, with the title of executive editor, now does much of the work he did, and a lot more besides. Sheila has the longest unbro-

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ken record of employment of anybody at *Asimov's*: she joined the magazine in June of 1982 as an editorial assistant, became managing editor a couple of years later, and executive editor in 1993.

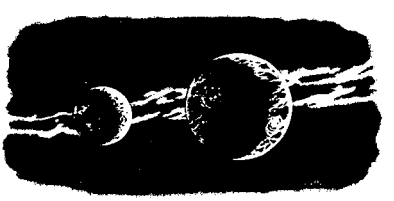
And so on and so on—the art director, the rights & permissions director, the associate editors, the advertising manager, the address of the editorial office—everything's different now, except for the continued presence of Gardner. However, one other name carries over from the 1977 masthead, and that's the major and lamentable exception that I mentioned above. The first issue proudly carried the name of Isaac Asimov as editorial director; the current issue still lists Isaac as holding that title, with, alas, the parenthesis (1977-1992) below the entry. Gone, yes, but hardly forgotten.

What about the *content* of the magazine? Has that changed much?

Not really, I would say. George Scithers and Gardner Dozois have, of course, somewhat different tastes in science fiction, as any two editors would, but each in his own way set out to acquire the best short fiction that could be found. The first issue contains material by, among others, Gordon R. Dickson, John Varley (two stories, one under a pseudonym), Arthur C. Clarke, Fred Saberhagen, and William Jon Watkins. I suspect that stories by any of those people would be welcomed by Gardner Dozois if they came in today, and in fact William Jon Watkins does have a piece in the current issue—a poem, though, not a story.

Things change; things stay the same. The sturdily mature *Asimov's* of the 18th Anniversary Issue is recognizably the descendant of the feisty, ambitious *Asimov's* of Spring 1977.

Oh, and last week a member of the California legislature suggested lowering the voting age to fourteen. That doesn't strike me as the wisest idea in the world, but neither do a lot of other things that our politicians say and do. If fourteen is old enough to vote, then eighteen is surely old enough to qualify a science fiction magazine as duly and truly long-established, even by my standards. I will never again think of *Asimov's* as a new magazine. Eternally youthful, yes, but definitely a magazine that has a long and distinguished existence behind it as it forges on toward its third decade. ●



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Mike Resnick & Susan Shwartz

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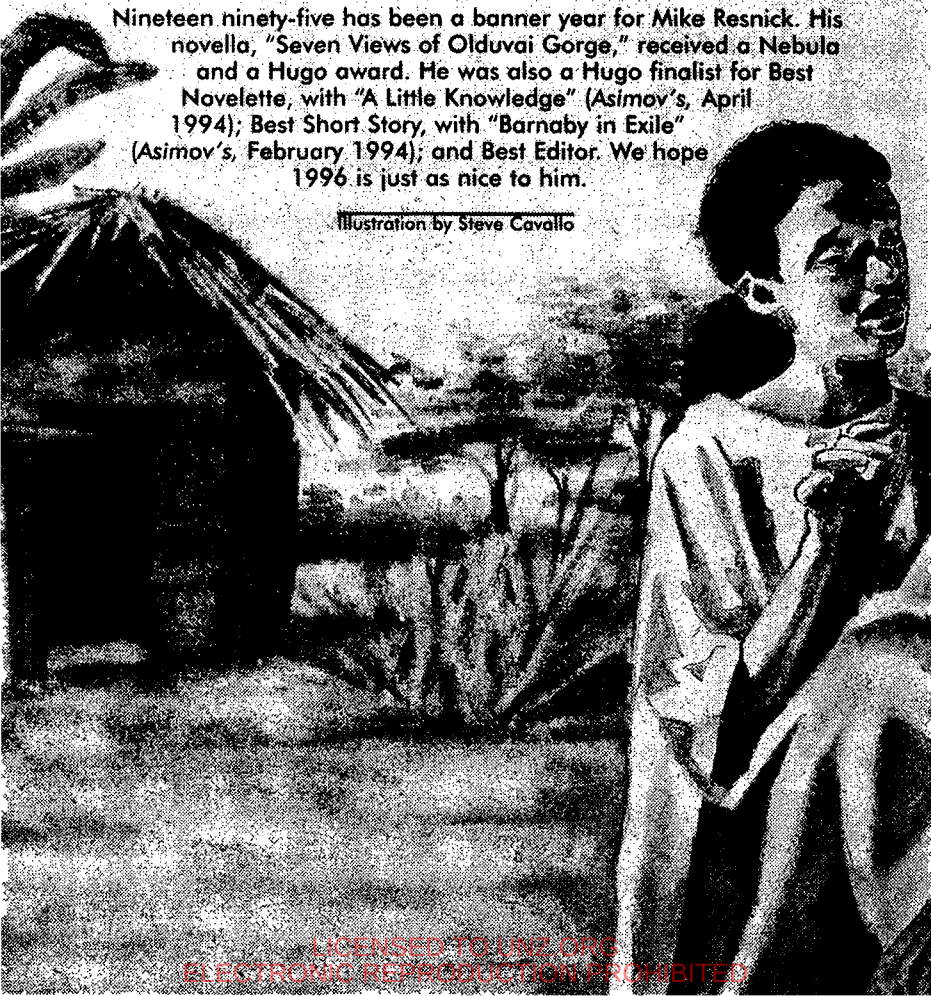
Susan Shwartz is a senior financial editor on Wall Street and a multiple Hugo- and Nebula-award nominee. She is the author or co-author of twelve novels, the editor of seven anthologies, and the author of over sixty short stories. Ms. Shwartz's most recent anthology, *Sisters in Fantasy,* is just out from Roc. Her next novel, *Shards of Empire,* is forthcoming from Tor Books. "Bibi" is her first tale for *Asimov's.*

Nineteen ninety-five has been a banner year for Mike Resnick. His novella, "Seven Views of Olduvai Gorge," received a Nebula and a Hugo award. He was also a Hugo finalist for Best Novelette, with "A Little Knowledge" (*Asimov's,* April 1994); Best Short Story, with "Barnaby in Exile" (*Asimov's,* February 1994); and Best Editor. We hope 1996 is just as nice to him.



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Her children's cries woke her from her safe nest. She stretched, easing the aches in her bones. In the quiet dawn, she ventured to the lake for water. She saw less of her enemies' spoor than ever before. Almost nothing was freshly dead, though a few circling birds warned her: soon. Not my children! *she wailed silently. They were fevered and ill and even dying. But where were they? No one crouched beside the lake. No one edged through the bush, seeking her. She had to find them soon, before she was a mother without children.*

The land was dry and brown, as it had always been, but there were differences. The footpaths were missing, the birds no longer fled in fear of her, the few antelope she saw were smaller and quicker than any she could remember. She felt uneasy, walking in the open, with no trees to climb should she come across those fearsome doglike creatures that could swallow her in three bites. She gripped her club, which was really nothing more than an old femur bone. She had watched a great cat bring down an antelope and waited patiently for it to fill its belly, then fought the birds for the spoils and came away with a weapon as well as a meal.

She looked up again. The birds seemed smaller, and they were the wrong colors. They were still ominous and foreboding as they rode the thermals high above the savannah and sought the flesh of the newly dead.

As the sun rose higher, she withdrew into the comforting shadows of the trees. Her stomach cried out, and she turned over a dry log, looking for termites. But the log crumbled into dust and she realized, even as she sifted through its remains, finding a few laggard insects, that the main army had moved on to choicer morsels.

How easy it used to be to find food. In the kinder days of her youth, she could have traveled fast, grubbing food from the earth or from hanging branches. Now, it took her hours to fill her belly so it did not cry like a baby, and she barely heard the cries or coughs of beasts. Her feet bled, tender after her long rest, but she trudged on. She had slept too long.

The camp lay forty kilometers due west of Moroto, in the blistering heat of the Karamojo country. Even the flies had become lethargic. Dust devils swirled across the empty landscape, red and angry, reaching hundreds of feet into the startling blue sky.

Two boreholes supplied water for all the tents. One teased them with cool, clear water for two or three minutes at a time, then went dead for half an hour or more, while the other offered a slow, sluggish trickle of warm brown liquid.

"Wake up, wake up!"

A weight landed on Jeremy Harris's cot, and a child shrilled in his ears. Translating the child's excited Swahili automatically, Jeremy fixed his tormentor, not four feet high, with a bleary eye, then glanced outside. What the hell was the kid doing waking him up in practically the middle

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of the night?

"Dr. Umurungi told me to fetch you. You remember old Kabute? He died around midnight."

Jeremy remembered the man: not forty yet impossibly aged, almost mummified, in the final emaciation of the AIDS that threatened to finish the job in Uganda that Idi Amin began and Milton Obote had carried forward. They died. Sooner or later, everyone died.

The child's eyes reflected awareness and resignation: he'd already lost both parents to the disease and was HIV-positive himself. It would be a miracle if he reached puberty. Forget AZT: the relief workers were happy if they could provide three meals a day.

"I'm sorry," said Jeremy. "Do they want me to talk to the family?"

He could think of several people better qualified by language or race to talk to the man's family—an elderly mother, two withered wives. One bore the marks of Kaposi's sarcoma, purple against black, and coughed almost constantly. There were several children; Jeremy would have bet good money that all of them were HIV-positive.

Jeremy was a volunteer, not a physician: if they needed him to drive, he drove. If they wanted him to perform medical tests, they taught him and looked the other way. If they wanted an English class, he taught it. When it came to bribing officials, he was without peer. Best of all, when (never *if*) they needed emergency funding, his old Wall Street training could usually wring it from some unsuspecting philanthropical prey—or allow the prey to donate it anonymously and still keep his tax break.

What they mostly needed these days, however, was a gravedigger. In New York, Jeremy had worked out with a trainer who came to his private gym when he didn't go to his university club, his company's fitness center, or any of the places that took up a large part of his very private life. But digging graves out here in the bush put more muscle on him than his trainer would have dreamed possible.

"Dr. Umurungi said they left the compound, taking Kabute's body with them."

The boy opened the tent flap wider. Jeremy winced at the sunrise and swore with the inventive profanity of the equity traders he used to match drink for drink at Harry's. Not only would the women and children not get proper care—so *what if they die a month before their time,* the darkness in him muttered, *we're all on Death Row here*—but carrying a corpse, they'd be lucky if they didn't run afoul of hyenas on the plain or crocs crossing the rivers on their way back to their village—and that was on the unlikely assumption that it hadn't been looted by Somali or Sudanese bandits.

He lowered his feet decisively, and the child practically hugged himself with relief. Reaching for his boots and trousers, Jeremy shook them before he put them on. He folded his bedding, just so. A place for everything

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or you'd go crazy, living in a cluttered tent in an AIDS relief camp. Everything in its place.

He unlocked the box where he kept his megavitamins and the other drugs, downing a handful of pills without water, before replacing the phials next to his portfolio statements, medical records, and a few letters. The most recent was from his parents in Vermont. He knew it by heart.

It wasn't very long. Surprisingly, it wasn't his mother who had written it, but his father, who had always been better with tools than words. The fact that Jeremy could continually force unnatural life into the camp's ancient truck was a gift from his father that he'd only now come to value. As a boy, he had lived in terror that those skills would chain him to grimy hands and grease-stained clothes, to life in a gas station, a town, a way of life he had fought to escape.

"Son,

"You didn't want your mother and me to come to the airport and see you off, so I didn't get a chance to see you. I don't suppose I'd have been able to say what I've been thinking about there anyhow. Things move too fast for me in New York, and you probably were all taken up with getting things arranged and saying good-bye to your friends." (What friends? Jeremy thought to himself. The one other person he might have wanted to see would never be there again.)

"And with your mother there trying not to cry, I couldn't have said what I wanted to say. We've never had all that much to say to each other that wasn't cars, or 'How's your schoolwork going?' or 'That's really interesting,' and now I'm sorry. I always thought maybe I was the wrong father for you . . . but that's water under the bridge. I want you to know that you don't have to do this. You're my son, and I'm proud of you. If you're sick, come home and your mother and I will take care of you. You always have a place here.

"Love, (his father had scratched it out, then written the word again. Probably he feared that if he had to recopy the letter, he'd never send it.)

"Your Dad"

Very gently Jeremy replaced the letter in its sheltering plastic bag. Then he pulled out the small, tattered box with the monogrammed cuff links and the unopened letter. Jeremy remembered the man to whom he'd given the cuff links. As always, he was surprised that the box had reached him with the letter and the rejected gift inside.

It would have been a mercy if some official had heard the cuff links rattling around and stolen the box before it reached him. It was a mercy that Raymond hadn't thrown the cuff links at him along with his anger when he learned just how disastrously careless Jeremy had been. "Gifts, always giving me things like I didn't know how to choose for myself. Well, this last gift you gave me was really a killer, wasn't it?" Ray had walked out, slamming the door on Jeremy and any chance they'd had for a life to-

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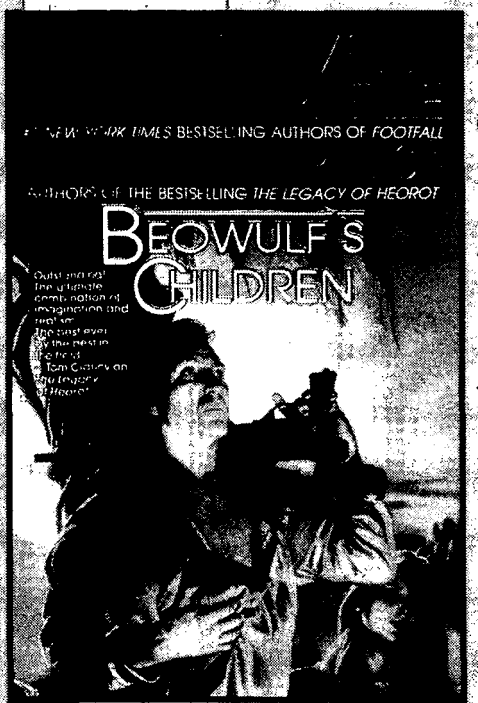

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gether, and all those gifts—except for the deadly one he carried inside him.

Jeremy left the box under the pillow on his cot and stuck the letter into his pocket. Maybe today he'd find the time—or the guts—to open it. Or throw it away.

Or maybe he'd lose it.

He turned back to face the little boy. I do have to be here, he told the ghost of his father. Everything in its proper place. Just as he was.

Automatically, he scanned himself. No lesions. No fever. No faint weariness, no cough, no trace of night sweats. Nothing to worry about.

Yet.

Like so many of the people in his world, Jeremy Harris was HIV-positive. The verdict had surprised the hell out of him, though he supposed it shouldn't have. His life had been so precisely arranged: the eighty-hour weeks where weekends blended into weekdays and when he sometimes lived on the phone so he could make his pile and pay for the place on Fire Island; the weeks and weekends down in the Keys, where the beer was cold, the seafood spicy, and the company—he'd better not think of *that* . . . or of how many of his old friends were still alive. You had to walk a very fine line between indifference, which could kill you, and caring too much, which would tear you apart.

The last time he'd visited his old haunts, the Keys had been like a ghost town. No one knew where Raymond was (or maybe he'd told them to keep their mouths shut). That whole group of writers and artists and smart guys with money had turned into people like his father, no good at words about the *real* things. The survivors were either drinking themselves into oblivion or, like Jeremy, working to the point of exhaustion while becoming health and diet fanatics.

And for what? To watch their other friends die while waiting for a cure that 98 percent of them could never afford even if it were discovered? He subscribed to medical journals and followed the latest research on S.I.V.—simian immunodeficiency virus—and the vaccine Harvard Med School had developed, one that protected monkeys for three years. He'd even allowed himself to hope when Johns Hopkins turned up a forty-three-year-old woman who'd had three healthy children after being diagnosed HIV-positive—and when, try as they might, they couldn't get infectious HIV from her blood.

Maybe I'm a mutant just like her! he thought desperately. Which, of course, made him feel even more like an outcast from the human race.

He went to Montreal to visit Biochem Pharma, where a new drug, 3TC, in combination with AZT, showed promising results. He monitored the Glaxo-Wellcome PLC merger with the attention the dying gave to the last rites because that had to affect the supply of the AZT he expected to need one day. What good did it do him? All the biotechs had tanked. AZT

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was more a poison than a cure, and with healthcare costs the way they were . . .

Of course, as long as he raked in the commissions, he had key man insurance from his company. He hardly thought they'd keep it up (*ha!* Now there was a good pun!) when he got *really* sick. And if he changed companies and came down with ARC or full-blown AIDS, there he was with a pre-existing condition. When his money finally ran out—his portfolio was only solid, not huge—he'd be out on the street, and that wasn't Wall Street—and on whatever might be left of Medicaid by that time.

So Jeremy kept fit. Every day he scanned himself for deterioration. As his friends and lovers sickened and died around him, Jeremy realized that he was what researchers called a non-progressor; he might have ten, fifteen, twenty years yet. One man, infected seventeen years ago, still had a normal CD-4 white blood cell count. Maybe Jeremy would get lucky too.

Day after day, he worked, and worked out, and waited either for the disease or a cure. You can't call that living at all, his psychiatrist said.

At an Audrey Hepburn revival at the Thalia, for God's sake, a handout told him how she'd starved as a child, working for the Resistance. Until cancer left her too weak to continue, she'd tried to feed kids in Ethiopia.

The very next day, *The Wall Street Journal* had carried a story on the AIDS epidemic in Zambia and Uganda. If that wasn't some sort of omen, he didn't know a thing about market timing. So he'd liquidated his stock positions and parked the money in secure Triple-A bond funds, said goodbye to his trainer, sold his co-op for a good price despite rotten interest rates, and unloaded his beach house. His friends thought he'd gone crazy, his psychiatrist thought he'd gone sane and helped him negotiate the wilderness of regulations, and his family simply cried and wanted him to come back home where everyone would whisper about "Jeff Harris's boy, what a shame, so young to go." Money and some damn good networking had enabled him to hook up with a small relief organization; and so here he was.

He finished his daily checklist. Nothing left out for kids or monkeys to steal. Everything in its proper place, except for the finishing touch. He'd given up the Hermès ties, the custom-tailored suits, the meticulous Manhattan grooming for the cheapest, toughest, coolest clothes he could find, but one grace note remained. From his footlocker, he pulled out a spool of red ribbon, cut off a couple inches, and pinned it to his shirt. The boy's eyes widened and he held out an eager hand. So Jeremy grinned and cut him an AIDS ribbon too, and out they went.

He began walking through the camp, which seemed like two separate worlds to him—or, actually, three. There was the world inhabited by the camp's employees: immaculate tents in a cluster, a spotless mess area, the infirmary—it was too small and too easily victimized by the elements

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to call it a hospital; even *infirmary* seemed to give it an unearned dignity.

Then there was the world of the Africans: they had come by the dozens, and finally the hundreds, once word got out that another crazy European was passing out free food and medicine, and a small city of mud and thatched huts now completely encircled the world of the camp attendants.

Finally there was that tiny world inhabited only by himself and Elizabeth, a pair of people who didn't fit in either of the other worlds. Jeremy, whose medical training was limited to a lifesaving badge he'd earned in swimming class when he was twelve, and Elizabeth, who had been born in Uganda and raised in Europe and didn't quite belong to either society.

As he passed a huge pile of folded, unused tents, he saw a troop of vervet monkeys edging closer to an extended family of Africans that were warming their banana mash breakfasts over a fire. Hunger had made the monkeys brave, bravery had made them foolish, and Jeremy knew that at least one family was going to be having meat for lunch.

At last he reached the mess tent and came to a stop before Elizabeth, who was writing meticulous notes in a journal while her tea sat, untouched and cooling, right next to the Coleman lamp on the breakfast table.

"Is that you, Jeremy?" she asked without looking up.

Dr. Elizabeth Umurungi's enunciation always sounded like an upper-class Englishwoman—one who spoke perfect French—rather than a convent-educated Achole who had fled to Britain with her parents when Idi Amin started decimating the countryside.

"No, it's Father Damian," he told her, wrapping his sweater about his narrow shoulders. It was strange: every evening he went to sleep sweating and wondering if he'd ever be cool again, and every morning he woke up shivering and wondering if he'd ever be warm again. That was Africa for you.

"All things considered, you'd hardly qualify as a saint," she retorted. "Pity. We could use a miracle or two."

She'd been finishing up her residency about the time he'd done his MBA: they had friends, or at least contacts, in common, and in what felt like another life, they'd skied the same hills in Switzerland. One of the few people he had confided in, she monitored his T-cell status along with those of the Ugandans whose long defeats she fought.

She poured him a battered mug of tea that he eyed suspiciously. "So it's not that designer herbal muck you used to buy. It won't kill you. Dehydration and hunger will. Sit."

He would have liked to eat by the fire, preferring the chilly air and the smoke to the cramped, dark interior and endless medical conversation of the mess hall—but as much as he was bored by such talk, he was even more bored with his own company, so he decided to eat at Elizabeth's

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table. His meal consisted not of the meticulously chosen, weighed, and cooked health foods that he had considered a matter of the merest survival, but rather of *posho* and banana mash which, even here, wasn't much.

"Think I ought to make a supply run?" he asked.

She shrugged.

"I got a dividend check," he volunteered. "Be nice to buy chickens. We could use the carcasses for soup." ("Money!" Raymond had spat. "It's all you ever think about! Well, let's see you try to take it with you!")

She finally looked up at him. "Homesick for Manhattan? Chicken soup isn't *that* magic. As long as we can feed everyone in camp, fine. But I do need you to drive me somewhere."

He bowed elaborately. With him, she wouldn't have to worry about assault—or about getting back to the compound safely.

"You want to track down the villagers that left this morning? Jabito told me about them when he woke me up."

"Jabito gossips too much. Old head; young shoulders."

"What do you expect?"

"I expect people not to slip away from doctors who are trying to help them," said Elizabeth with the hauteur acquired in a childhood spent commuting between Paris, London, and Kampala. Elizabeth might have learned patience and compassion in her self-appointed mission to help rebuild the country that had exiled her family, but the airs of the *grande dame* still clung to her. Though Jeremy had to admit that on her, even a tattered lab coat and old crew T-shirt looked chic. She'd been a model in Paris. Not the type he'd pretended to drool over as a nervous teenager reading *Sports Illustrated*'s swimsuit issue every year, but the sort of model who turned up in *Vogue* and had designers fighting each other over who would have the privilege this season of draping thousands of dollars of silk over her arrogant, elegant bones. Once and future stars were always chucking careers and going back to school, so the story on her in *People*—"Supermodel Abandons Runways for Med School"—only produced a raised eyebrow or two before everyone in Jeremy's study group went back to being cool. And working their asses off.

While that might impress the locals, it also intimidated them, and they kept her at a distance that saddened her. For all the darkness of her skin, she was as much a foreigner here as Jeremy. Maybe even more of one. "I've got their medical records, such as they are," she added.

"You got a Land Rover?"

She smiled at him. "Better than that. I've got a flatbed truck with an almost-new spare tire."

"Where'd you get it?" he asked excitedly. "I thought you told me you were just about out of money."

"I am. We got it from a donor." She paused, then amended her state-

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ment. "*I* got it from a donor. You're not the only financial wizard around here."

"If you're a financial wizard, how did you manage to run through all those millions you made modeling?" he asked with a smile that was almost smug.

She sighed. "I bribed a lot of the wrong people when I decided to set up the camp. Then I had to go back and bribe the right ones. Our equipment cost a fortune to import. We're on our fifth Land Rover; do you know how much they cost, and how quickly they die out here?" She paused, then added ruefully: "And then there were my little blunders, like one hundred tents nobody wants to sleep in. They were more than eight hundred dollars apiece, and I can't get a single patient to spend a night in one."

He wanted to teasingly say, "Well, they're *your* people,"—but he bit the words off just in time. They were no longer her people, and in fact distrusted this Westernized woman, this "black European," even more than they distrusted Jeremy, who in their eyes was just another well-intentioned, bumbling American, a typical Two-Year Wonder who was working out his guilt at his parents' expense.

"Of course they won't sleep in them," said Jeremy. "Tents have corners, and demons live in corners. Much better to live in nice round huts."

"Did they tell you that?"

He nodded.

"Why didn't they tell me?"

"You're a Ugandan," he said. "They probably assumed you knew."

"I left when I was a child," she said irritably. "I can't remember every little superstition they . . . *we* . . . have." She paused. "I wish I knew why they confide in you and not in me."

"Us subordinates know not to trust the big chief," he said with a smile.

For a moment he thought she would explode with anger, but finally she laughed. "Anyway," she added, "I've actually got two jerrycans of petrol and a radio. We'll travel in style."

And with enough room to bring back the villagers, whether they want to come or not. Assuming we don't find them dead by the side of the road—or such parts of them as the hyenas leave.

"What if they don't want to come?"

"What happens to the children?" countered Elizabeth. "The old lady can't do it all. It's sad: Two daughters-in-law, both with children. Under normal circumstances, she'd have all the makings of an easy, honored old age. The daughters-in-law would do all the work for her." She sighed deeply. "But now she'll be tending them and bringing up the children until they get sick too."

"Does she test positive?"

"She's negative. But that's not surprising. She lives a traditional lifestyle, and in her culture, women don't have sex once they reach

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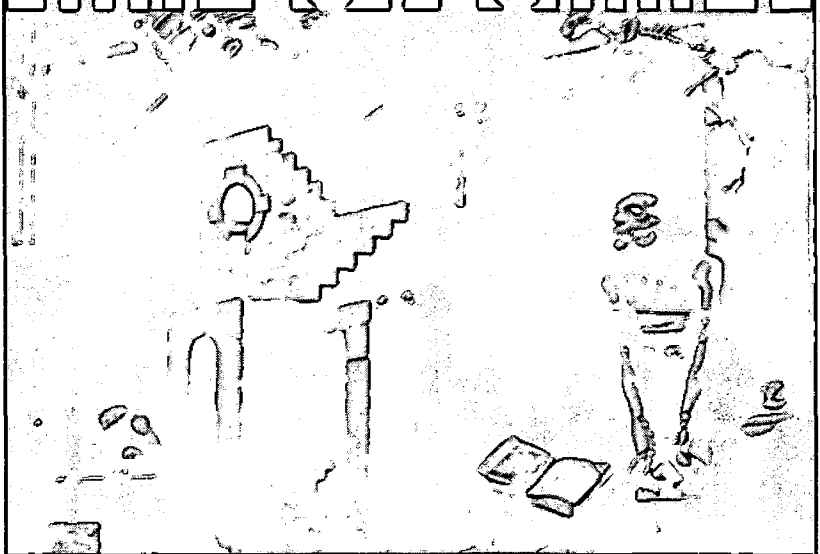

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menopause. Besides, her husband died years ago. The son must have picked it up from his circumcision group, or maybe from some whore in Kampala or Entebbe." She gestured to a beat-up flatbed truck at the far side of the compound. "Get your gear and let's get this show on the road. I'll wait for you at the truck."

He joined her a few minutes later, climbed into the driver's seat, put the vehicle in gear, and they were on their way.

The road wound in and out of the bush, passing through dozens of villages, many of them totally deserted, though it was impossible at first glance to determine whether they were empty due to war or AIDS.

"God, I hate these potholes!" muttered Jeremy, as the ride began doing painful things to his spine and kidneys.

"The locals play games, trying to figure out whose they are," said Elizabeth with a bitter smile.

"Whose *what* are?" repeated Jeremy uncomprehendingly.

"The potholes," she explained. "They try to guess whether they were made by Amin's troops, or Nyerere's, or Obote's, or Okello's, or Musaveti's."

"What a delightful way to spend your childhood," said Jeremy wryly. "Trying to guess which homicidal monster destroyed the road through your village."

"Musaveti's a good man," said Elizabeth adamantly. "And Nyerere is a saint."

"Three out of five still isn't good odds," replied Jeremy. "Especially when you have to live through it all."

Elizabeth quickly grabbed her hat as another bump sent it flying toward her window. "We should reach the end of the tarmac pretty soon," she said.

"It gets better then?"

"It's much better right after the long rains. You can't repair tarmac out here, but if it's just holes in a dirt road, the rains will have leveled it out."

"*Nothing* can level this road out," said Jeremy devoutly. He looked out the side window just as the tarmac ended. The thornbush, which had been rapidly encroaching on both the savannah and the roadside *shambas,* had triumphed totally. The grass, which was green and endless a few miles back, now existed only in isolated pockets, and was dotted by the bones of dead wildebeest and kob. The red dust from the road obscured his vision, but he could see troops of vervet monkeys, plus an occasional red colobus, scampering through the trees and observing the strange-sounding foul-smelling vehicle from the safety of the branches.

As the truck slowed down to cross a *lugga*—a dry riverbed—Jeremy saw a figure disappearing into the thornscrub some fifty yards off to his right.

"What is it?" asked Elizabeth as Jeremy brought the truck to a halt.

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"There's something back there."

"What?"

He shook his head. "I don't know." He paused and frowned. "I think it was a woman or a child; it was too small to be a man."

She shrugged. "Nothing unusual about that. Uganda's got a lot of people and a lot of bush. You tend to find the one in the other."

"Stop patronizing me," he said irritably.

"Then stop belaboring the obvious," she replied. "You saw a woman in the bush."

"There was something funny, though."

"Funny ha-ha, or funny strange?" she asked.

"Funny strange."

"What?"

He paused uncomfortably. "I only caught a quick glimpse of her—or him—but . . ."

"But what?" she persisted.

"She walked like her feet hurt, and *nobody* in Africa walks like that."

"Maybe she cut her foot."

"The average African spends his whole life walking barefoot on rocks and in thornbush country. I don't think you could cut his foot open with a knife."

"Nonsense," she said. "I cut my own foot just two days ago."

"You're not the average African," he retorted. "You spent most of your life in Europe and America."

She ignored his comment, picked up the binoculars, and held them to her eyes. "There's nothing out there. Probably it was a heat mirage. Or maybe the glare on the windshield made you think you saw a woman instead of a tree."

He shrugged. "Maybe."

Or maybe his eyes could be starting to go—except that it was way too early in the disease cycle for him to hallucinate. And besides, he didn't have the disease yet.

Jeremy continued looking out the window as he started driving again. He spotted a pair of silver-backed jackals, and a few minutes later he had to swerve to avoid a family of hyenas that were fighting over the remains of a small duiker, but there was no sign of the small figure he had seen. Or *thought* he had seen.

He noticed that sweat was starting to pour down his body, and he transferred the letter to another pocket to keep it dry.

"What is that?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing," he replied. "Just a letter from an old friend."

"You haven't opened it yet."

"I'll get around to it."

"Would you like me to read it to you while you're driving?" she offered.

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"Not necessary," he said.

"It's no trouble."

"No."

They came to another village. There were sixteen thatched huts falling to ruin. Nearby was a large thorn *boma* for the cattle; next to it were four deserted *shambas*, the mango and banana trees fighting a losing battle for survival against the encroaching bush. The village had a well so that the people would not have to drink contaminated water. (Fat chance, thought Jeremy. The water in the nearby bilharzia-infested stream was crystal clear. The people would take one look at the safe brown water coming up from the borehole and opt for the stream every time.) There was only one problem: no people. Like so many other villages, it was completely deserted.

"I get so sick of seeing this," remarked Elizabeth, gesturing toward the empty huts.

"Where to now?" asked Jeremy, staring ahead to where the road forked and went off in two directions.

"I'm not quite sure, but I seem to think we go to the northwest."

She saw a strange beast, growling constantly and belching a foul-smelling smoke. It was like nothing she had ever experienced, strange and terrifying even for this strange and terrifying land. She quickly hid behind a thornbush and waited for it to gallop off.

The beast had a most unusual means of enticing its victims. Instead of stealthily creeping up and then pouncing, like the great cats and canines, it showed her an image of a human very similar to herself. Doubtless she was expected to approach it out of curiosity, and it would open its slavering jaws and swallow her whole.

She would have to be prepared for this beast in the future, for she had much to do, and would doubtless encounter it again.

They managed to get lost, of course. After three days of punctured tires (five), false paths (eleven), bug bites (three million), and fraying tempers (beyond computation), the truck crashed out of the underbrush a scant twenty-six miles from where it had entered, and turned onto the narrow, almost overgrown track that was the best road Jeremy could find with sweat, map, frequently profane radio exchanges, and the occasional shout to any people they passed on the road.

"Look up ahead," said Elizabeth, pointing.

As they approached a village, a thread of smoke curled upward, and a flock of birds flew overhead. Jeremy was used to children spotting his Land Rover and running ahead or alongside with wild shouts—but for some reason the inhabitants of *this* village, even the children, silently watched the truck and then went about their business.

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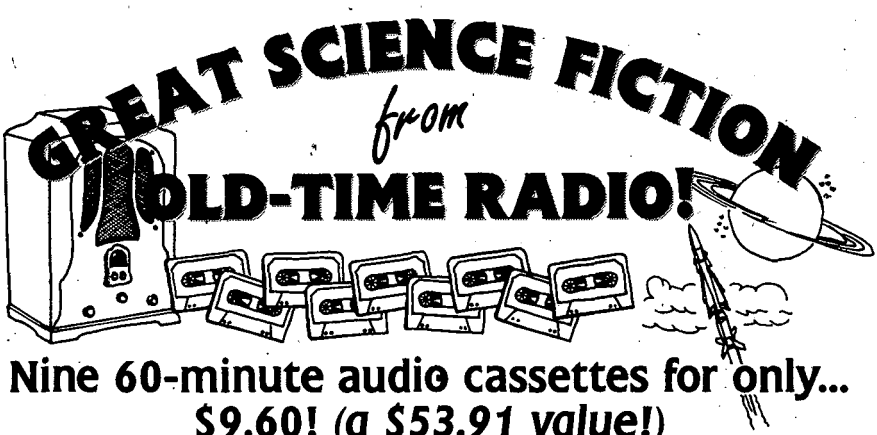

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"What do you make of that?" asked Jeremy, frowning, as the truck crunched over the rough road.

"I don't know," said Elizabeth. "They know we're bringing food and medicine. They should be swarming out to greet us."

"Have you ever seen a reaction like this?"

"No," she said, frowning. "Not even when I was a little girl."

"They don't act afraid," he noted. "Just . . . I don't know . . . *wary*."

Next to one of the huts was a mound of heaped dirt. Even though it had been encircled by a crude fence that must have caused someone a lot of trouble to construct and erect, the ground was trampled, the clods scattered in places, as if something had tried to dig it up. Jeremy felt a muscle along his jaw jerk. They wouldn't have had a whole lot of strength to spare to dig the man's grave deep enough—and there was always the problem of how to get out of the pit once it had been dug.

Two children squatted by the roadside, waving at him. When he waved back, they rose slowly. He thought he recognized them. They'd been fed in the camp for almost a week, but the long walk home had sweated the newly gained weight off of them. Already their ribs were showing above their bellies, which, thank God, had at least not started to swell out in severe malnutrition's dreadful parody of fat. Squatting outside the nearest hut, the healthier—or rather, the least sick—of the dead man's young wives tended a few scrawny chickens. Beyond the huts, an emaciated ox raised its head at the newcomers, then went back to the all-important business of grazing the near-grassless land. The oldest child pushed at the ox, driving it toward two cows in equally poor condition.

Still, concluded Jeremy, these villagers were better off than a lot he had seen. They had *posho* from the relief center. They would have milk. They might even have eggs and meat. It was a wonder they had anything left at all. For years, this entire country had been little more than the scene of a crime that called itself a government—and now, hardly a step up, it had become a plague site.

God help them all.

Tall and thin, her head high, the mother of the dead man appeared in a doorway. She had an infant in her arms, two others clinging to her legs. She walked over to the squatting woman and handed her the child. The younger woman opened her dress, and the child began to nurse—or to try to.

"That'll infect the baby!" Jeremy muttered.

"You want them to talk to us? Then be quiet!" Elizabeth got out of the truck, raised a hand in greeting and spoke in a formal Swahili, totally different from the "kitchen Swahili" Jeremy had learned.

Jeremy killed the motor, opened the door, stepped down, and joined Elizabeth just as the woman raised a hand. Greetings should have gone on ceremoniously, with an invitation to a meal to follow, but there was

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little food and less time to spare, as her apologetic gestures seemed to indicate. Abruptly, she clapped her hands. The children scattered, disappearing into various huts to emerge wearing the ragged Michael Jordan T-shirts they had received—each decorated with a loop of red ribbon. Jeremy grinned. He remembered giving out those ribbons and slipping a dime to one of the kids, who had lost a front tooth the day before. *The Tooth Fairy comes to Uganda. Right. I'd grant you three wishes, kid, if I could.*

"We know you mean well, *Memsaab,*" the old woman was saying, "but we have no faith in your magic. We prefer our own. That is why we came home."

"But who will help you?" asked Elizabeth, trying to ignore the word *"Memsaab,"* which was only offered to whites and outsiders, never from one black Ugandan to another. "Your grandchildren are too young. Your son is dead, and his wives are sick." She paused. "It is not right that you live alone, without family to share your burdens."

"I wish you would let us bring you back!" Jeremy blurted in English.

"Damn it, Jeremy!" hissed Elizabeth. "I know you mean well, but that's an insult."

The old woman turned to Jeremy. "My father is dead," she said. "My husband is dead. My sons are dead. My grandsons are too young to give me orders. Uganda has been independent for thirty long rains. I will not take orders from you or any other European. I need no longer call you Bwana."

When Jeremy had finally stammered an apology, Elizabeth took pity on him.

"Why don't you unload the truck?" she suggested. That won her a look of awe from the old woman. For all her dedication, her Swahili, her attempt to make herself seem like a good daughter of the tribe, Elizabeth was still a European to them. She was all the more alien for being a black European and a woman who could give orders to men, especially white men, in this society where brides were still bought and sold.

"If you will have us—"

Instant protest, invitation, and apology followed in order: how could she doubt her welcome?

"—we shall stay for a few days and observe the children. We can make ourselves useful to you."

The woman smiled. Surprisingly, given her age and health, she still possessed most of her teeth, and they glinted in the sunlight.

"But I have help, *Memsaab*." Elizabeth flinched. That word again. So much for Sisterhood and fitting in. "My *bibi* has come to help me."

"Her baby?" asked Jeremy, trying to translate.

"*Bibi* is 'mother,' " answered Elizabeth. "You've seen those signs in the burnt-out stores and *dukas* along the road to Kampala, the ones that say

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Babito? That's a contraction, or actually an acronym, for Baba, Bibi, and Toto—father, mother, and baby. In other words, stores for the whole family." She paused. "Now please go unload the truck before you offend her again."

Jeremy unloaded sack after sack of *posho,* the cornmeal that the Africans made into a porridge (and which Jeremy thought had the consistency and taste of library paste), and finally a precious box of powdered milk that they could use for the babies when (never *if,* only *when*) their mothers' milk ran dry. If he had anything to say about it, they'd be drinking it now: if a mother was HIV positive, a baby could pick it up from breast milk if it hadn't already contracted it in the womb.

Elizabeth Umurungi disappeared into the dark interior of the hut with her medical bag, leaving Jeremy standing outside. The children approached to watch him as he finished unloading the truck. Aware of their presence, he pocketed the keys, reached into the glove compartment, and slipped the revolver into his pocket. No sense putting temptation in their way.

When he walked to the door of the hut, Elizabeth and the old woman were kneeling beside a pallet that held the second wife. Jeremy remembered her from the relief center. He was surprised she had made it back alive.

"Get me some water," Elizabeth ordered, not even bothering to turn around. "Rubbing alcohol too. We have to bring this fever down."

One of the children immediately ran off to obey this not-quite-stranger with her shiny instruments and her way of commanding a man taller and stronger than their father had been. When the child sloshed back with a tin pan filled with dubiously clean water, Jeremy carried it and the rubbing alcohol inside.

Elizabeth sponged the woman on the pallet, while the other woman hovered and tried to soothe the patient. The sick woman's face glowed, the life flickering in it like embers in an ebony lantern, building, flaring up . . . At any moment, he thought it would surely burn out into darkness.

"Help hold her still!" Elizabeth ordered when the patient began thrashing, and Jeremy, who had always worn sweatbands and gloves when working out in his West Side gym, leapt to obey.

When they finished, the old woman held her daughter-in-law against her shoulder while Elizabeth brought out a syringe and administered it.

Of the old woman's "*bibi,*" there was no sign at all. Probably she was too shy or too frightened to even look at the strangers; Jeremy didn't envy Elizabeth the task of coaxing her out where she could be examined.

Jeremy paused, sleeping bag in hand, and looked around the hut that had been allotted them. He was used to sweat blotching his shirts the in-

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stant he put them on. He was used to insects, used to animals, used to taking care of people in ways that would have made the men on the trading desk pass out. But the dark, claustrophobic hut with its long-unswept floor, its hovering, whining flies—his imagination conjured up sleeping sickness, yellow fever, and typhoid for starters, and then began dwelling on more exotic diseases.

Elizabeth simply shrugged and spread her sleeping bag out on the floor. Maybe it was only dried mud, but it certainly smelled like cow dung.

Dinner had come and gone—a scrawny chicken. They had protested that they had their own supplies, they could perfectly well feed themselves and everyone else; but the chicken had been killed and stewed, and they had had to eat it with every evidence of appreciation for the sacrifice it represented. Despite reprimands from mother and grandmother to let their guests eat in peace, Jeremy managed to feed at least half his dinner to the kids. He felt like a guilty child himself, feeding the family dog beneath the table, and then felt even guiltier for equating these starving children to household pets. It was a feast to them, and when their faces shone with the meager fat from the chicken skin, they started to yawn and soon wandered off.

Elizabeth and Jeremy left the hut and sat outside it, poking at a fire Jeremy had insisted on building. He promised himself that tomorrow he'd show the children how to toast things on it, wondering what he could substitute for marshmallows. He pulled out Ray's letter, studied it thoughtfully, and then placed it back in his pocket, unopened.

Beyond the circle of the village and its tiny fields, darker than the night sky, lay uncleared land. The forest was coming back after the devastation of the past decades, and slowly, the wild creatures were returning. A hyena giggled maniacally, a lion coughed, and far off in the distance hippos grunted and bellowed.

Elizabeth picked up a green branch and maneuvered a few smoldering logs. They suddenly burst into flame, and a shower of sparks rose into the dark African sky.

"Where did you learn to tend a fire?" asked Jeremy, whose camp duty it was to build fires.

For an instant, her eyes lit with humor. "In Girl Guides," she answered with a smile. "Certainly not in the bush." Jeremy forced himself not to grimace. He still held his rolled-up sleeping bag. "Are you going to hang onto that security blanket all night?" she asked.

"Why don't I sleep out in the truck?" he suggested. "More proper for the hired hand, wouldn't you say?"

"Whatever makes you happy," said Elizabeth. "Those kids look like they'd love to spend the night talking with you." It was obvious that she would much rather have been able to say "us" than "you." Suddenly she

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swatted a tsetse fly with surgical efficiency. It lay still for a minute, then got to its feet and groggily walked off.

"Nobody ever told me they were armor-plated until I got here," said Jeremy, staring ruefully at the fly.

"If they get any worse, I may join you. We can take turns standing guard." She sighed deeply. "I wish we had some light," she continued. "Better than the firelight, I mean. I'd like to run some tests on that woman. She ought to be dead from that fever—she had a body temp of at least 105."

"She was burning up," Jeremy agreed. "I thought I'd be digging a grave." He had been so careful to restrain the sick woman's flailing hands. Face it: he had been afraid, just as he'd been every day since he came here. With every patient he touched, he faced the question: are you the one who'll kick my T-cells out of balance? Will *your* AIDS be the death of me, too?

It was no different for him than for the other relief workers. He knew that. He was no one special. But he was ashamed to ask if the others were afraid, too.

"Did you see?" asked Elizabeth. At least, she could escape into the discipline of her profession. She could do something. "Her lesions actually seem to be shrinking."

There was a drug on the market that reduced lesions—chicken pox or Kaposi's sarcoma, it made no difference—but it was so expensive they'd need the treasure of King Solomon's mines to pay for it.

"Any chance of remission?" Jeremy kept his face out of the firelight so she wouldn't see the wild hope that heated it. At least, he hoped it was hope and not the first episode of night sweats.

Elizabeth put a hand out and gently touched his arm. "God only knows," she said softly. "There's always a chance, Jeremy. Always. And you're a non-progressor. Every day, every month that you hold out increases the chances of a cure, and gives us more time to study you. When we get back to the compound, I'll test your blood again." She paused. "I wish we could bring her back. And I wish the old lady's *bibi* would show up. You know, they tell me she cured one of the other villagers. They say he was dying of AIDS. That can't be true, of course, but I'd still love to learn her methods."

"Don't tell me you believe in witch doctors?" asked Jeremy with a smile.

"I don't believe in all the superstition that goes along with it, but some of these folk healers have stumbled on medicines that are new to science. There are plants that no one has classified yet, and it's a fair bet that some of them will be effective against certain diseases. There's a Nobel Prize waiting for the scientist who brings back the right plants." She stared at the fire. "Yes, I wish I could convince the old woman to intro-

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duce me to this *bibi* of hers. Who knows what we might learn from her?"

"Maybe after a few days, when they see we don't mean any harm . . ." began Jeremy.

"They already know that, Jeremy," said Elizabeth. "Half of them have been to the camp at one time or another." She poked at the fire with the stick, silent for awhile. A sudden chorus of warning screams and barks from a troop of baboons told them that a leopard was in the neighborhood. The noise continued for a couple of minutes, growing gradually softer as the troop retreated higher up their trees and the leopard decided to seek other prey.

Jeremy fumbled again for the letter in his pocket, brought it out, stared at the once-familiar handwriting for perhaps the tenth time that day, and began to tuck it back into the pocket.

"You're driving me crazy with that letter!" snapped Elizabeth. "Either read the bloody thing or throw it into the fire!"

"I don't *feel* like reading it," said Jeremy.

"Then I'll read it!" she said, snatching it from him. She bent over and began reading aloud by firelight:

"Dear (that's a joke) Jeremy:

"After I stopped shaking and walked out on you and got back to the Keys, Bud wanted to head North after you with his AK. But Steve said what the fuck, Bud tested clean—no point throwing away his life along with yours and mine: And Steve's. He's real sick. ARC pneumonia. He calls it ARC-light bombing when he's got enough breath to talk. I've moved in with the two of them to try to help out. Money goes farther that way, and I like to think I'm useful. It's hard to watch him come apart and know this is how I'm going to end up.

"Then I think it's how you're going to end up too, and it's not so bad. For once, you're not going to be able to weasel your way out of something. Only you call it negotiating, don't you? It's part of that important stuff, like attention to detail and execution, that makes you such a big success on the Street. Wall, that is, not 42nd, where they sell themselves another way. Not much difference, is there, when you come right down to it? Talk about 'execution'—you've sure executed the two of us like a pro.

" 'We can fight this,' you said. Maybe you can turn *what's left of your life into a holy crusade against this thing you gave me. Me, I just want to live what years I've got left. In a way, I envy Steve. He's out of it* now, *and he's got Bud with him. I don't know what Bud'll do after he goes. Write, maybe. I'm using his computer. Don't mind the spelling mistakes. Bud's trying to get some rest, and if he knew I was writing to you, he'd probably pitch a fit.*

" 'Why in hell are you bothering?' he'd ask. For one thing, I want you to know *what you've done.*

"And I wanted to return these cuff links to you. Bud was all for pawning

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them, sending you the ticket, and throwing one hell of a party, but that was always your job, wasn't it? With your Platinum Card, easy come, easy go, right? I don't want to drink your booze, and I don't want my friends to, either. And I don't want to keep these things around. I saw the catalog you ordered them from. 18 karat gold. I know what you paid. You must have been out of your mind.

"You want to look right, you said. You belong here. You belong with me. Dammit, if I belonged with you, why didn't you ever bring me home? I saw that picture of your folks you hide in your desk. They look nice. Your father—he's a big guy, maybe big enough to take in another son. Maybe he even valued the one he had—you, never mind the clone you stitched up out of bits of grad school, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and The New Yorker, *or whatever the hell. Instead, Tiffany cuff links. And the bloody Hamptons and why don't I move up to the City from the Keys, full-time, and take the goddamned Series 7 and you'd help me find a job. Then I could dress up and go to banquets for Greg Louganis or something with you and get my name on program committees. And if you died first, then I'd be the right kind of person to be written up as 'companion of' in the New York* Times *obituary section with all the other guys who are dying too damn young.*

"No, thanks.

"You said I was the best thing that ever happened to you. But that wasn't good enough. You had to play around and go test positive for HIV and give that to me, too.

"Careless, that's what you are. Stupidly, killingly careless. Like the rules don't apply to you. I saw how your friends act when you're not looking or maybe you don't care. They stiff waiters. They cut lines. They shout at people on the phones, people who can't shout back because they need their jobs. You probably even barged into the doctor's for your blood test ahead of six other people who had to wait even longer because you *were there and* you *were important.*

"Well, it's going to get you too, Jeremy Harris, just like it's getting the guy with TB on the street corner, wishing to hell he was dying down here where it's warm.

"Besides, I want to return the cuff links because I don't want to get to the point where I have to pawn them and use the money. I wasn't smart, like you, at making money. Never had all that much. With luck, when I go, I'll go quick. If not, I plan to be somewhere warm, somewhere maybe people will take care of me. That's why I left New York. When Steve's gone, I'll probably head even farther south.

"If I had folks I was alive to, I'd go home to them, maybe, not hide their picture.

"It doesn't matter a whole hell of a lot. State of mind is important, though; that's what Steve's doctors said when they sent him home. We're not hoping for a miracle cure. He hasn't got a whole lot of time left, and no

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one knows that better than he does. But he's happier with his partner around and his garden and his boat in sight—we hauled it out in front of his window. He can hear the ocean, and sometimes, when he's able to eat, one of us goes and catches him a fish.

"So here's the cuff links. Keep 'em, throw 'em away, or pay Tiffany's to change the monogram for the next sucker. No use wasting good stuff.

"Steve just woke up. Got to go in a minute. Bud yelled in from his room, 'If you're writing to Jeremy, tell the sonofabitch to get a life.'

"You had one. You threw it away. It couldn't happen to you: you were important. You were privileged. Well, it did, and now you've thrown away my life too. Get a life, for as long as you can. That's what I plan to do. So I'm going to live as much as I can. First, I'm taking care of Steve. Did you ever help anyone up close? I'm not talking about writing checks and handing out cuff links. It's kind of a mess, only helping someone who's that sick makes you feel . . . it's like you respect yourself. You know, I didn't for awhile there. You were paying the bills. I had to go along, I thought. But I hated it.

"Don't try to get in touch. This isn't something you can negotiate until you talk me around. I know you're better at it than I am. Thing is, as long as I don't see you, I can remember the good things. But if I see you, I know I'll get mad all over again. And scared, just like when I first heard, and I prayed for a heart attack right then and there so I wouldn't have to go through what I know lies up ahead.

"Don't look for me. Don't even think about me. You know the old line, 'I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you'? Right now, I think that if I saw you, I'd kill you or die trying. And there'd go the few years I've got left. I'm not willing to throw them away too.

"Get a life, Jeremy. If you know how.

"Raymond"

Elizabeth stopped, her eyes glittering in the firelight. She was silent for a long time. Then she looked up. "I don't know what to say . . ."

"Maybe now you understand why I didn't want to know what was in it," he said bitterly.

"It's a terrible burden to carry," she acknowledged. "But you're not the only one this has happened to."

"That's a damned arrogant thing to say. At least you were able to come back here. . . ."

She moved abruptly, then stopped. It was as if she wanted to take his letter—and his idiotic defensive statement—and toss the whole lot into the fire. "I didn't mean to come back alone. I wasn't alone in Paris. Ever. I could have had anyone. Bankers, oil men, Frenchmen whose blood was so blue it was a wonder they could still breathe." She sighed. "What I chose was Paul. That was his Western name, the one he used in medical school. He was an Ibo."

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Jeremy shut his eyes as he considered this revelation. Achole and Ibo. Elizabeth would have had about as much in common with Paul as if she'd been a nice Jewish girl who fell in love with Moammar Quadafi.

"Sorry," he muttered. At this rate, he'd have to make a tape or something: "Jeremy Harris—His Greatest Apologies!" and play it as needed.

A hippo grunted, much closer than before, and Jeremy peered into the dark, trying to spot it with no success. They weren't carnivores, but they killed a lot of people who got in their way at night.

Elizabeth spat on the ground, all the chic, all the European gone from her for a moment. "We had such plans. He was going to establish the best medical clinic in Africa, and I would be a high-profile spokeswoman or fund-raiser, probably both. We were going to be a bridge between the nations, Paul and I—and since he was the man, and that counts for more than you can imagine on this continent, we set up shop in his country." She sighed, and her shoulders looked bony, not elegant, not any more. "I tried. I did my best. I stuck it out long enough to be called a useless Achole bitch."

"By him?"

"By everyone. Including him."

Jeremy wanted to reach for the letter, but managed to control himself. "Then what?"

"I applied to medical school myself. My O-levels were good. I'd taken a First in university. Given Harvard's admission policies, I knew I could get in as a special student, then move on to med school. When I was done, I took my money and built the relief camp, and cajoled a few doctors into coming back to Uganda, and sold space to a few people like you, who were willing to pay to work here for whatever their personal reasons." She paused. "It was important to me when the camp became a reality. I collected all my clippings and sent them to Paul."

"Where is he now?"

"Nigeria. Or maybe hell, for all I know. There's not much difference between the two. I read last month that there's yet another revolution there; maybe they'll shoot him this time." Again she poked at the fire.

Jeremy watched her face in the flickering firelight. All I ever saw before tonight was the model's looks and the cool, competent exterior, he mused. I guess we're all of us trapped inside our bodies. Even someone as beautiful and accomplished as Elizabeth,

"Nigeria will do just fine without him," she concluded after a long silence. "It doesn't need a savior." She stared into the fire again. "I just wish I knew why Uganda is cursed."

"Uganda's not unique," replied Jeremy. "All the African countries have AIDS."

"We're unique," she said adamantly. "First Amin, then the other butchers, and now *this*. You know, Kenya has a high HIV incidence, almost as

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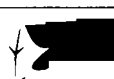

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high as ours—but their people aren't dying like ours. I've even heard former colonials in Nairobi, sitting at their lily-white bars and restaurants, *complaining* about it. They thought AIDS would return Kenya to them, but hardly anyone's dying and they feel cheated! And here, right next door, in the most beautiful, fertile land on the continent, we've lost entire villages." A look of fury spread across her face. *"It's just not fair!"*

"Maybe we should learn from other countries instead of resenting them," said Jeremy, while deep within him a tiny voice protested in outrage.

"Their time will come," she replied. "What we need is more information. Sooner or later, we're going to find out what it is about non-progressors that makes them fight the disease better. Sooner or later, we're going to find someone with natural immunity . . ."

"God help the poor sucker," said Jeremy. "You'll make a lab rat out of him for sure."

A rich lab rat. A celebrity lab rat. There'd be fortunes to be made from an AIDS vaccine—if you'd lost enough of your soul to charge what the market would bear. The market, of course, being guys like him, not women like the ones lying two huts over, fighting off fever and the long defeat of their lives.

"Or *her*," she replied. "Who knows? Maybe this old woman's mother is the one. She's certainly lived long enough."

"So where is she?"

"Who knows?" Elizabeth frowned. "I've been away a long time. My clothing's wrong, my accent's wrong, even my magic's wrong. They don't trust me."

They sat in silence by the flickering firelight for a few more moments. Finally Elizabeth yawned, stretching like one of the children. Jeremy smiled at her. *I'm sorry that you hurt, but I like you even better now that I know you're human.* Maybe he and Elizabeth could adopt each other or something. He could be Uncle Jeremy to any children she would eventually have. If he lived long enough to see her meet a man with more sense than Paul. *Not wisely, but too well,* Jeremy thought. That went for both of them.

"I really *am* going to bunk in the truck," he said, picking up his sleeping bag. "The hut's too stuffy for me, even if does get cold out here, and this way I can keep an eye on things."

"While you're sound asleep?" asked Elizabeth. He'd rather hoped she'd be too sleepy to be sarcastic.

"Good night," he told her and trudged wearily toward the battered truck. He spread out his bedding on the back of the vehicle. If anything tried to get him, he'd at least hear it coming, and he still had the pistol, just in case.

* * *

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Jeremy jolted instantly awake, his heart pounding, his body drenched. But this wasn't fever.

Something was watching him.

He forced himself back into stillness, keeping his eyes shut. His hand, hidden beneath his head, gently released the safety on the pistol. Leopard or bandit or whatever, anything that tried to attack him was going to be very, very surprised, and then very, very dead.

Steady there. Play possum. He slowly opened his eyes. When they adjusted to the darkness, he glanced stealthily about. A tiny blot of shadow detached itself from the doorway of the sick woman's hut and paused, staring at the truck.

Dammit, those kids had no business wandering around here at night! He'd seen the fence around the old man's grave. Maybe the local scavengers would like live meat for a change. The children seemed eager to provide it.

You know perfectly well why their mothers can't watch the kids, he told himself. *They're sick or they're dying. Probably both.* Never mind what Elizabeth had said about miracles. The fact that her parents had survived the madness of Idi Amin had made her a cock-eyed optimist.

He'd give the kid five minutes, Jeremy decided. Five. If it didn't do its business in the bush or wherever, then go back into the hut, he personally would escort it back to its mother.

Wait. Don't move.

The shadow detached itself from the shelter of the hut and moved out into the clearing, toward the fenced-in grave. It squatted there, and Jeremy could see the tremors that shook it. No, shook *her*. Had one of the little ones been a girl? He couldn't remember. There'd been so many children, each to be greeted with a grin and a loop of scarlet ribbon as long as supplies held out, that sometimes he didn't look at them as the individuals they were—or that they would grow into if they lucked out and lived.

This was a girl, barely four feet tall. Much too small to be out alone. He gathered himself to leap down from the truck and take the child in charge.

Not yet.

The child's shoulders shook. *Why, she's crying for her father!* Jeremy's own eyes filled. He blinked frantically, and when his sight cleared, he found that the child had turned around.

And it was no child.

It had the face of a withered old woman—with eyes that seemed filled with love and compassion.

This is crazy! Africa's finally got to me. I must be hallucinating. How can you look at a pair of eyes, especially in that ancient face, and read compassion or anything else into them?

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A cough came from the darkness of the forest, a cough and a rush of paws, followed by a squall of pure rage as the child with the ancient face beat at the predator with a club. Finally Jeremy could make out her attacker: a small, scrawny leopard, made bold by its hunger.

No time for waiting now. Jeremy grabbed for the pistol, aimed as best he could, and fired.

The explosion woke up the village. Jeremy built a huge fire and reconnoitered, pursued by Elizabeth's ironic comments about mighty hunters. A trail of blood and pawprints led back to the bush and vanished there. Upon returning, he insisted on seeing all the children and counting them, and trying fruitlessly to determine which of them had been the one that had beaten off the leopard.

Gradually, the infants stopped screaming. The sick woman in the hut stopped moaning for "Bibi." She even consented to drink some broth and put on a T-shirt that had been donated by Elizabeth.

Finally the village quieted down and went back to sleep. After a long, long while, so did Jeremy. If anyone ventured outside, he didn't hear it—or anything else.

In the morning, he found that the truck's radio and spark plugs were missing.

"Why would anyone take them?" he asked Elizabeth. "It's not as if this was telephone wire or something they could use for ornaments. The radio's no good to anyone without a power source, and the plugs are totally useless—unless someone thought they'd look cute stuck through his ears." He paused. "If they don't turn up, we're in deep shit: no transportation and no way of calling for help."

"All we can do is ask," replied Elizabeth wearily.

She walked over to the old woman's hut and entered it.

"Good morning," she said with a smile as the old woman looked up from the daughter-in-law she had been tending.

"Jambo, Memsaab," responded the woman.

"That is a very formal greeting. I would much rather you called me Elizabeth."

"But *you* are always formal, and don't call me by *my* name," the old woman pointed out.

"I apologize, Maroka," said Elizabeth. "I did not mean to offend."

"I am sure you did not." Maroka reached out and touched Elizabeth's arm gently. "You are a good person, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth finally looked down at the younger woman—and almost did a double-take. Her eyes were alert and animated, and she was no longer covered with sweat. Elizabeth reached out a hand, feeling for signs of the fever, and finding none.

"Has she eaten?"

"Yes, Elizabeth," answered Maroka. "She has had *posho* and milk. She

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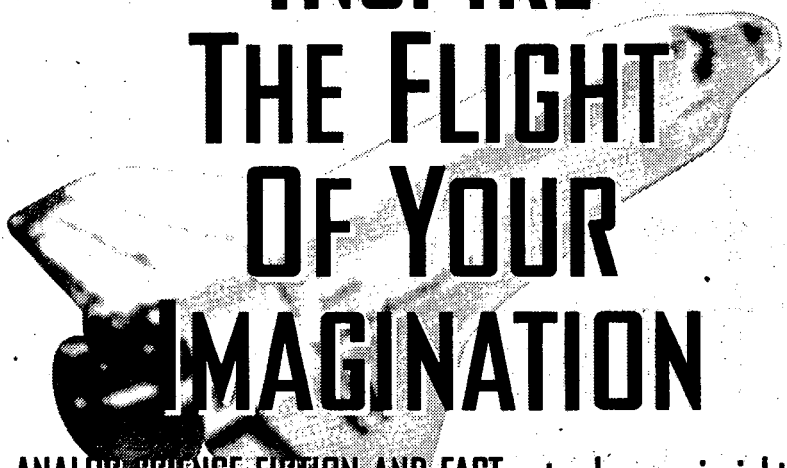

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asked for *pombe,* but I decided she should not have any until tomorrow."

Elizabeth examined the young woman for another few minutes, then straightened up. "It's amazing," she said at last. "My medicine has never been able to do this before."

"Your medicine did not save her," said Maroka. "It was Bibi's magic."

"Bibi came here last night?" asked Elizabeth.

"Yes."

"Where is she now?"

"Hiding," answered Maroka. "She is shy of strangers. She will be back after you have left."

Elizabeth glanced out the door, wondering where Bibi might be. Then her eyes fell on the truck, and she remembered the purpose of her visit.

"There is a problem, Maroka," she said. "This morning we have found that certain things are missing from the truck. We must have them back, or the truck will not run."

"A monkey took them, Elizabeth," suggested Maroka. "Or perhaps a baboon."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you have many other villages to visit, and nobody in *this* village would want to keep you from your work. We know it is important."

Elizabeth frowned. In a culture where no one ever spoke harshly or said anything unpleasant, Maroka's answer was the closest she would come to: "Because we don't want you here, and would never do anything to keep you from leaving."

"We still have food and medicine to give you," said Elizabeth.

"We have food, so it is best that your food go to a less fortunate village," replied Maroka. "And we have no need of your medicine. Bibi's magic is much stronger."

"I *really* want to meet her," said Elizabeth, "and learn about her magic."

"I think she is afraid of you."

"Please help me," said Elizabeth earnestly. "She is an old woman who will probably never travel ten miles from here. Whatever magic she performs is needed all across Uganda."

Maroka paused and considered what she had heard. "That is true," she said at last. "I will tell her what you said, Elizabeth."

"Thank you."

"But I do not think she will come."

"Please ask her anyway," said Elizabeth. She inspected the younger woman one more time and then left the hut. She rejoined Jeremy, who was still rummaging under the hood of the truck, searching for further damage.

"Well?" he asked. "Does she know where our spark plugs and radio are?"

"I can't be sure, but I don't think so," said Elizabeth.

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"It took you fifteen minutes to come to that conclusion?" he asked sardonically.

"It took fifteen seconds," she said. "The rest of the time we talked about medicine. Or magic."

"I don't follow you."

"That young woman—the one I thought would be dead by today—is one hundred percent better."

"What did you give her?" asked Jeremy.

"Nothing I haven't given hundreds of other patients," said Elizabeth, frowning. "I'm thrilled that she's recovering—but everything I know about medicine says she shouldn't be."

"And they think it's magic?" asked Jeremy. "Even though they saw you administer the medications?"

"Evidently Bibi came by last night and laid a spell on her," said Elizabeth.

"A spell?"

Elizabeth shrugged. "A leaf. A plant. Some kind of flower. I don't know what. But Maroka's convinced that she's the one who saved the young woman." Elizabeth frowned. "Hell, for all I know, Maroka's right. That's why I want to find her, even more than I want to find our spark plugs. If this woman has stumbled on some kind of miracle cure, I want to know about it."

"Maybe they're right," said Jeremy. "Maybe it *is* magic."

"Nonsense!" she snapped. "There's no such thing!"

"Oh, I don't know," said Jeremy. "To create penicillin out of bread mold seems like magic to me. Or to take a piece of silicon and make it think faster and more accurately than a man, that's magic too. You're too concerned with process, Elizabeth, when it's the result that counts. If the old lady's mother can cure people by magic or any other means, I'd bring her a batch of sick people instead of trying to steal her secrets."

"I don't like what you're accusing me of, Jeremy," said Elizabeth sharply. "All I want to know is what she's doing to make them well—if indeed she's doing anything at all—and then I want to find out how to synthesize it, bottle it and distribute it."

"Maybe it can't be done."

"You give me the facts, and I'll do it."

"To quote Don Quixote, facts are the enemies of truth."

"That's romantic drivel," said Elizabeth. "Facts are all there is."

"Not around here," he replied.

"Oh?"

He smiled. "Ask the villagers: There's magic, too."

"Are you *trying* to be argumentative?" she demanded.

"Some unseen old lady may be going around curing people of AIDS," answered Jeremy. "All *you're* concerned with is how she does it, and all

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I'm concerned with is getting her to do it again. Now, if *that's* argumentative . . ."

"No," replied Elizabeth thoughtfully. "No, I suppose it isn't, really. You've got a vested interest in being cured; I've got one in finding out *how* to cure people. Our approaches are bound to differ."

"I grew up on Peter Pan and Mother Goose and Mowgli and Oz, and you grew up with facts and figures and slaughtered villages," replied Jeremy. "Of course our approaches are different."

"You simply will not understand!" she said irritably.

"No," he admitted. "But show me a cure and I might *believe*."

She angrily turned away from him and strode off into the village, where a clap of her hands summoned all the children from their huts. Those few who were wearing clothes twisted them as they stood in a ragged, uneasy line, expecting the worst from the two strangers, one white and one black.

"All right, believer," said Elizabeth to Jeremy. "*You* can tell them what we lost." It would be a stretch in kitchen Swahili, but walking back to the relief camp was a far less attractive alternative.

A few adults gathered around to chuckle in amusement at Jeremy's awkward descriptions of the things that were missing. The children's eyes simply widened and they looked from one to another.

Then Elizabeth walked up and down the row of children, studying each in turn. Finally she stopped before the tallest of the boys, who had long since outgrown his Michael Jordan T-shirt and was wearing a filthy, tattered Muhammed Ali T-shirt from another era.

"You know, don't you?" she said. "I can see it on your face. You know who took those things."

The boy's bare feet scuffed in the dust. He muttered something.

"I can't hear you," said Elizabeth.

"Bibi took them."

"His mother?" interjected Jeremy, puzzled.

"Perhaps," answered Elizabeth. "In formal Swahili, *bibi* can also mean grandmother."

"You mean Maroka?" asked Jeremy, surprised.

There were indignant protests from the healthier of the two wives, who had come out to watch. From Maroka there was only a haughty lift of the head.

Elizabeth turned back to the child. "I want you to tell me where our things are. We can't go home without them."

More sidelong, wary glances, child to child.

Elizabeth left the boy and stopped in front of a girl who was no more than six or seven years old. She didn't say a word, just stared at her. The girl kicked the red dirt nervously with her bare feet and refused to meet Elizabeth's gaze.

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"Do *you* know?" Elizabeth finally asked her.

"*She* said not to tell."

"Who said not to tell . . . and why?"

The little girl looked up, and then spoke in a rush. "Bibi. She says your hearts are good, because you wish to help. But she also says if we stayed in your village, we would have all gotten sicker. If we had left earlier, my father would still be alive."

"But that's not true!" protested Elizabeth.

"Bibi says it is," said the girl, staring unblinking into Elizabeth's eyes.

Elizabeth kept trying, but after a few minutes it became obvious that the children would not disobey Bibi and reveal where the missing parts were hidden.

Elizabeth exchanged a quick, frustrated glance with Jeremy. "Beautiful Uganda, land of my people, where no good deed goes unpunished," she murmured.

Jeremy was almost as depressed as he had been when the results of his initial bloodwork had come back. Radios, if mistreated, could be cranky, and there was a limit to the truck's ability to sit outside without maintenance. Let it be exceeded, and even if they found their equipment, they'd still be stranded in this tiny village.

"Well," said Elizabeth, "I may as well make my morning rounds." She grimaced in Jeremy's direction. "Are you ready for an *un*scientific opinion?"

"It's my favorite kind."

"Personally, I think this whole goddamned village needs to have its collective head examined."

The day passed uneventfully, and as the huge sun went down, Jeremy summoned the energy from somewhere to gather wood for a fire. The children were busy gathering firewood and water, and putting the chickens in their coops, which would be hung from nearby trees. Jeremy watched Elizabeth's friendly overtures met with polite coolness, as the villagers decided that black skin and a knowledge of Buganda did not make her one of them.

He considered the missing equipment for the hundredth time. They couldn't count on anyone arriving here except by accident. They *had* to persuade the thief to give back the radio and the spark plugs.

Elizabeth emerged from a hut and walked over to join Jeremy. "I must have misdiagnosed that woman," she said, puzzled. "She showed all the classic signs, and I thought her fever would finish her off in a matter of hours. But she's no more an AIDS victim than *I* am. Hell, even that case of thrush she had is clearing up." She shook her head. "Maroka wants to make her sit up tomorrow. I suppose she's right; the sooner she's back on her feet, the better."

"Who will watch her until she can go back out in the fields?"

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Elizabeth shrugged. "We still haven't seen Bibi; given her age, that'd be a good job for her." She paused. "You know, that's another reason I'd like to get out of here; the poor thing's so scared of us she's hiding out in the bush. I didn't come here to turn some poor woman out of her house and put her at the mercy of the hyenas."

She seemed about to say something more, then changed her mind and headed off to her sleeping hut.

Darkness descended, and Jeremy soon fell asleep on the back of the truck. When he woke in the morning, the crimson ribbon was missing from his shirt.

Interesting. He climbed down, swallowed his pills, cut himself a fresh ribbon, and put the much-diminished spool into a hip pocket, just in case.

And suddenly he *knew* that he was being watched. He found himself glancing over his shoulder, watching the long sharp shadows in case some tiny fragment broke off from one of them and headed for the truck or the fields or the deep bush.

When he paused to wipe his face after splashing it with some water, the sense of being watched grew even stronger. Once or twice, he caught a flicker of motion on the far side of a clearing, at the edge of his vision.

Maroka's *bibi?* He hadn't gotten a good look at her, but he couldn't imagine who else it could be. He set off across the clearing, and soon spotted some footprints in the dust. They were small enough to be the prints of a child, but they were deep, as if the person they belonged to was carrying something heavy.

They led him deeper and deeper into the bush. Soon the vegetation had closed around him. He could hear the chirping of birds and the buzzing of insects, but the only motion he could see was the slight swaying of leaves in the hot breeze. He could almost imagine that he was some stone-age man, pushing his way through the bush in pursuit of his dinner; surely the terrain hadn't looked much different even a million years ago.

A hyena giggled in the distance; in Jeremy's mind it became a three-hundred-pound hyenadon. A vulture circled lazily overhead; he pretended it was a pterodactyl.

He was still imagining a distant past and a more physically imposing version of himself when suddenly he came upon a clearing. A huge dead tree had fallen down—he imagined that a mastodon had pushed it over—and a nearby termite mound towered some twenty feet above the ground.

Then, suddenly, he became aware of a cluster of children, and saw the baby—(and how had they let the kids take it out of the hut?)—in the arms of what looked like another child.

That is, it looked like another child until he got a glimpse of its wizened face. It was a female, no question about it, for she was nursing the infant. Her skin seemed incredibly ancient, not so much lined as engraved with

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seams. The sparse hair surrounding it, growing far down on her low brow, was white. But the smile on her lips as she looked down at the baby was very beautiful and oddly familiar.

I've seen you before, I know I have. But where?

Jeremy took a step toward her. A dry twig snapped beneath his foot and a dozen birds burst from cover while overhead a family of colobus monkeys began shrieking. The woman with the ancient face jumped, startled. Then she laid the baby down on a piece of red cloth and fled into the bush. The infant, deprived of his milk, promptly began howling.

"Come on, Bibi!" he wanted to yell after her. "Can a sick, skinny American be that frightening?"

By the time Jeremy had helped soothe the infant, placing it in the eldest girl's arms and coaxing all of them to believe he wasn't some sort of monster just because the old woman had fled, he had gotten his thoughts—and his memory—in order.

One summer, just for a change, he had rented a place on Nantucket, not the Hamptons: a shabby, ramshackle, desirable home that had cost him a bundle. It had been a good summer, and he hadn't begrudged a cent of it, despite about a week of rainy days. Along with the seafood, the sailing, and the whale watching, he'd had the whole old house to prowl through. And, in its attic, he'd found treasure indeed—thirty years worth of *National Geographics.*

He'd loved that magazine ever since he was a child. In fact, he'd dreamed of being an explorer, maybe even a paleontologist or geochronologist until his Uncle Sid—the executive vice president—sat him down and explained the facts of life to him: student loans; grants; bottom lines. The best way—probably the *only* way—to participate in these expeditions was to fund them.

So he'd packed the dream away, but he'd kept up his subscription to *National Geographic,* joined the Nature Conservancy, and always made donations to the American Museum of Natural History. They were good causes and tax-deductible, but the *real* reason was that he loved them.

Now, those yellowed covers and fragile pages riffled in his imagination, and he remembered Dr. Donald Johanson's discovery of *Australopithecus afarensis,* some 3.2 million years old. She was mankind's ancestor, a tiny female Johanson had called Lucy after the Beatles record his staff had played incessantly during the dig.

And now he had seen her. Not as a mummified corpse or a pile of white bones, either.

He'd seen her as a living, breathing being. Nursing her great-to-the-Nth-power-grandchild. He even knew her name.

Bibi.

While everyone else was celebrating the miraculously recovered young

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woman's emergence from the hut in which she was expected to die, Jeremy wandered over to the truck and picked up his "bait": a bowl of *posho* and some dried fruits.

There was no sense telling Elizabeth what he had seen or what he planned to do about it. She would give him so many rational explanations that he would have ended up believing her and not trying to entice the ancient woman back. So while Elizabeth lay deeply asleep within the hut, Jeremy laid out his traps on the back of the truck, then stretched out right beside them. He forced himself to close his eyes: moonlight would reflect off them, and it stood to reason that the superior senses of *Australopithecus . . . pitheca? . . .* would spot it.

He waited.

And then it was morning, and the fruit was gone.

"It was *her*," said Jeremy to Elizabeth. "I know it was!"

"Then what are you going to do—sleep out in the truck again?"

He shook his head. "That's *my* turf, and it makes her too cautious."

"Surely you're not going out into the bush at night!"

"You want your spark plugs back, don't you?" he retorted.

"Not at the cost of your life."

"I'll be fine."

"Sure you will," she said caustically. "If you don't get totally lost, you'll probably run into that leopard you shot."

"He's out of the area," replied Jeremy.

"How do you know?"

"The baboons are quiet at night."

She stared at him. "This is really stupid, Jeremy."

"Probably," he agreed. "But unless you have a better idea . . ."

She walked through the bush, eyes and ears alert to any danger. The animals were different from those she was used to—smaller, but just as dangerous. She came to a small stream, checked carefully for predators, then squatted down, cupped a hand, and brought some of the life-giving liquid to her lips. A marabou stork landed a few feet away and she jumped.

Her first urge, now that she had satisfied her thirst, was to return to the cave she had found, where she would be safe for the night. But then the wind brought the scent of fruit to her nostrils, and she decided to investigate . . .

The moon had long set, and he was on the verge of drowsing off, his back against the thick bole of an acacia tree, when he finally saw a small, familiar figure steal out from a nearby bush across the clearing. It paused to stare at him, and Jeremy forced himself to remain motionless.

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Tiny shadows swung from her neck. As she came closer, Jeremy saw what it was: she—or one of the children she tended—had strung the spark plugs on a grass string, and she was wearing them as a necklace.

Come on, sweetheart, he thought as his heart pounded. He had spread his treasures out on the ground: the red cloth in which the infant had been wrapped, some dried apricots, a bowl of *posho,* a long loop of scarlet ribbon. *Come on!* But the tiny creature paused, suddenly frightened. *Please,* he thought again, this time imploringly. *Please, Bibi!*

The figure turned toward him, lifting her head and straightening up, which set the spark-plug necklace to swaying once again. Then, attracted by the prizes he'd set out, she drew closer.

She recognized the cloth and snatched it to her breast, cradling it like an infant. She caught up a dried apricot and chewed it quickly, her eyes shining with pleasure. Then she reached for the strand of crimson ribbon.

Jeremy laid his hand down on the other end of the ribbon.

Bibi jumped back.

Jeremy leaned forward carefully. She had seen him with the women and children; she had to know that he wasn't a threat. Still, she watched him carefully, never taking her eyes from his, never loosing her grip upon the ribbon.

That's right. Think of the necklace you can make. Think of how it'll delight the kids.

"Come on," he whispered to her as he got slowly, carefully to his feet. Would she understand any speech at all? "Of course you want it. It's pretty. I'll trade you. This for . . ." he waved at the spark plug necklace in a gesture of *let's barter* that might have been old when she was young.

The ancient woman backed away. *Smart, aren't you? Why bargain if you can get it for free?* He tugged lightly on the length of ribbon, trying to draw it toward him, and her with it. She let herself be drawn and looked up into his face.

He was struck by her eyes. Even under the low, furrowed brow, they glowed with intelligence. This was not a "primate"; this was a *person.* He smiled at her, and she smiled back.

You've seen me. I'm your friend. I shot the leopard.

"I really need those spark plugs," he said softly. He leaned over, cautiously, maintaining the tension on the red ribbon. He was six feet tall to her four. A little further, a little longer—and his fingers closed on her arm.

He was strong, especially compared to her—but she was wily. Even as she squalled with anger, she let him draw her closer. And then, with a smile of glee at her own cunning, she buried her sturdy, three-million-year-old teeth deep in his arm.

Jeremy let out a yelp of surprise and pain. Human bites were as nasty as those of the big cats, he'd heard, and even dirtier; but this bite burned

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like molten iron.

Goddammit! I thought you'd come to save your children, not kill them! Are we that *disappointing to you?* And then came a frightening thought:

God help me, I've contaminated her!

He realized that he was bleeding like the proverbial stuck pig, his arm was swelling, and the moonlight shone off some nasty red streaks that had started to travel from the wound up toward his lymph nodes. He could hear his teeth chattering as he burned and shivered and tried to use his belt as a tourniquet.

Why, Bibi? You can't have come across the endless eons just to bite a man who's already dying. It doesn't make any sense!

Then he blacked out.

The sky glittered as if it were filled with diamonds. More diamonds, or maybe sapphires, reflected off the brilliant surface of the lake. Or maybe it was an ocean. A white wake bisected it, and ripples shimmered, then evened out as the water calmed. Jeremy thrashed. He wanted to tell everyone that it was a good sign that the water was troubled, it meant that spirits were abroad, or afloat, or something. Anyhow, it meant that miracles could indeed happen, even to him. His arm burned; he ached all over; and his mouth tasted as if bats had roosted in it.

He thrashed and felt weights land on him, forcing him back down. He opened his eyes and saw Bibi, the infinitely loving mother of the race, up in that glittering sky, surrounded by a rainbow haze that turned into crystals even as he watched, then dropped down in showers of gems. *Lucy in the sky, with diamonds. And I thought it was just a song!*

He'd been young once, without this treason in his blood and body; and he'd water skied in the Keys with guys as carefree as he himself. He'd linked arms and chanted, "The whole world's watching!" So it was, and Bibi was watching too, her ugly, beautiful, infinitely loving face grave with concern.

"If you get sick, come home," his parents had written, "and we'll take care of you."

That's just what I've done, he wanted to say; *I've come home, and the mother of us all is taking care of me.*

Then he fell into a restless sleep in which he was walking, walking, always walking. He was walking not merely across the millennia but across goddamned millions of years toward someone who had cried out in pain. Toward a *lot* of someones. And he thought his heart would break from the effort and the sorrow.

Jeremy awoke, shivering, as three women sponged him down. A child's voice piped up like rock music when the lead singer goes falsetto. He heard a cuff, and a cry, and the child was out of there.

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In the muted grey light of a dawn he had never expected to see, he found Elizabeth Umurungi's troubled eyes, much reddened, watching him. "If he doesn't come out of this now . . ." he expected her to say. Instead, he could lip-read the words of the Rosary.

He cried at her sorrow. He imagined that someone took his hand in a warm grip, unlike any he had ever known. It drew him back across the years, across the gulf of sickness, fear, and death, out of the place where the sky dropped diamonds and back into the familiar smells and sounds of the tiny village.

Flies buzzed overhead, butting up against the hut's thatched ceiling. Jeremy wrinkled his nose at the reek of antiseptic, so totally at odds with the homelier smells of animal dung, human sweat, and cooking fires. Not far away, water trickled into a metal basin . . . God, he was so thirsty! He tried to ask for water. Something between a croak and a whimper emerged from lips that cracked open with the effort.

Another voice echoed his. Someone went to the door and called. Shouts that might have been cheers sounded from outside.

"He's coming around? Good! Stay with him."

His eyes were so thoroughly gummed shut that it seemed to take an hour to open them. He flexed his fingers. Still all there. What about his other arm, the one Bibi had bitten?

Experimentally, he moved it, and flinched.

"I wouldn't try that," said Elizabeth. "You've been pretty sick. Bit of a reaction to the rabies vaccine. Or maybe the tetanus."

The *what?*

"Maybe you can help me out," continued Elizabeth. "I don't know what got you. I just know I found you, swelling up like a balloon, blood oozing from your arm, and nothing in sight."

"It was Bibi."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Elizabeth.

"It was Bibi, and she didn't do it to hurt me," whispered Jeremy weakly.

"Rubbish."

"You'll see," said Jeremy. "Ask her yourself."

"Why in the world would she come back here—*especially* if she bit you?"

"Because she's worried about her son."

"You're not her son," replied Elizabeth patiently, as if speaking to a child.

"We are *all* her children," rasped Jeremy. "Somehow, she felt our pain, knew we were in trouble, and through means we'll never understand, she did what any mother would do: she came to help us."

"Jeremy, you've been delirious. You're still not thinking rationally," said Elizabeth. "She's an old woman, that's all. Possibly a bit retarded.

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And she's probably mute; the children told me she used some form of sign language when she spoke to them."

"She can speak," said Jeremy with absolute conviction. "It's just that no one can understand her language."

"Oh?" said Elizabeth sardonically. "Just what language does she speak?"

"I don't know," murmured Jeremy. "It hasn't been heard in three million years."

"You're sicker than I thought," she said as he passed out again.

When he awoke, he felt good.

More than good. He felt better than he'd felt in years. For the first time since he'd contracted the virus, he felt ready to get up and seize the day.

And then, suddenly, the revelation hit him. He tried to sit up, but found he didn't have the strength. A child looked in, saw him struggling, and called Elizabeth.

"What on earth is the matter with you, Jeremy?" she asked as she entered the hut.

"Nothing!" he said. "Absolutely nothing!"

She stared at him, puzzled.

"Don't you understand?" he said excitedly. *"There's nothing wrong with me!"*

"What are you talking about?"

"As soon as we get back to camp, I want you to run another blood test on me."

She looked at him as if she expected him to foam at the mouth momentarily. "You don't seriously believe that you're no longer HIV positive, do you?"

"Just test me," his voice reflecting his absolute conviction.

"There's never been a single recorded case of a spontaneous cure, Jeremy."

"It's *not* spontaneous!" Jeremy said excitedly. "And no one records cures out here in the bush. *She* cured me, just like she's cured so many others. That's what she's here for."

"And just how do you think this old, illiterate woman, who is totally ignorant of all medicine and technology, cured your incurable disease?"

"She bit me."

"You mean all I had to do all these months was bite you and you'd have become HIV negative?" said Elizabeth sarcastically.

"No. *She* had to do it."

"She undoubtedly bit you because you scared her."

A feeling of overwhelming fatigue swept over him, and he lay back on his pillow. "I feel very sorry for you," he said.

"*You* feel sorry for *me?*" she repeated. "Why?"

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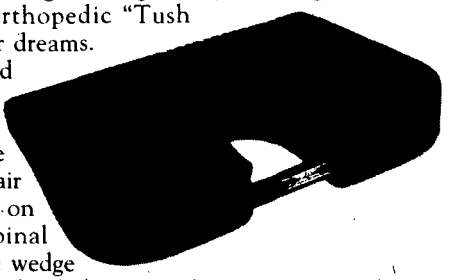

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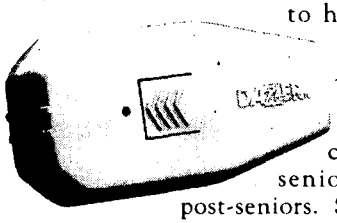

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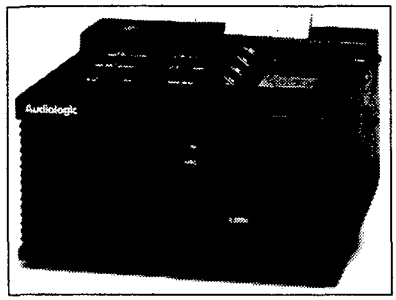

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"Because you know too many facts and too little truth," he said as he struggled to remain awake. "You'll test my blood, and because you don't believe in Bibi, you'll take two or three more samples before you acknowledge what your tests tell you."

He could almost feel a rough, callused hand run tenderly through his hair as he dropped off to sleep once more.

Jeremy was outside, chopping firewood, working up a sweat and feeling great about it, when Elizabeth called him over to her hut.

"What is it?" he asked when he arrived.

She held up the spark plugs, strung together on a thread of scarlet ribbon.

"What happened?"

"I left some costume jewelry outside the hut," said Elizabeth. "She came during the night and accepted the trade." She grimaced. "They cost me a cultured pearl necklace and a silver-plated bracelet."

"I think both sides made a good trade," said Jeremy.

He looked across the village, past all the huts, toward the bush.

Thank you, Bibi. I will probably never see you again, but I owe you my life, and I will dedicate it to helping your other children.

They had been back in camp for a day. Jeremy had put in a long morning tending patients and passing out food, and was sitting on a camp chair just outside his tent, reading a ten-month-old copy of *The New Yorker,* when Elizabeth appeared.

"I tested your blood," she announced.

"And?"

"I couldn't culture HIV from your blood if I had all the resources of the Mayo Clinic here." She paused and stared at him. "You got your miracle, Jeremy. You're clean. HIV negative."

Suddenly tears welled up and spilled down his cheeks. For just an instant he thought he could feel Bibi's hand tighten around his, a mother reassuring a child who has been desperately ill.

"I *told* you," he said at last.

"I didn't believe you then, and I don't believe you now," answered Elizabeth. "But whoever and whatever she is, she's worth her weight in gold to us." She paused thoughtfully. "She's why they said that Kabute wouldn't have died if they could have gotten him back home—because *she* was there waiting for him. And she's probably why we saw that fatally ill woman's lesions shrink and the thrush go away."

Jeremy grinned. " 'Probably,' hell! Of course it was her. And now I'm going to live. I'm going to live forever and ever!"

The next morning was cool and clear, and they decided to eat breakfast

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outside. The crackling of the eggs and bacon frying attracted a small troop of vervet monkeys, and a black African kite swooped down from a limb above the fire and swiped a piece of bread right out of Jeremy's hand.

"They're such rogues," said Elizabeth as the kite flew away with its prize.

"Well, it's nice to know that *something* on this continent isn't endangered," remarked Jeremy.

She watched the kite for another moment, then turned to Jeremy. "I've been giving Bibi a lot of thought."

"And?" asked Jeremy.

"We've got to go back and find her," answered Elizabeth. "I'd kill for the chance to have AIDS researchers examine her. I still don't know that I buy your story about her curing you with a bite, but whatever happened, she obviously gave you some biochemical agent that kills the HIV virus." She looked at Jeremy wryly. "It'll never replace the Salk vaccine, but there's simply no other explanation. I've *got* to find her and bring her to the camp."

"She's not a lab animal," replied Jeremy seriously. "She's got to remain free to do her job."

"Her job?"

"She has other children to cure."

"You're not a child."

"We're all her children."

"*That* again," said Elizabeth with a sigh.

"*You* don't have to believe it," said Jeremy, protecting his bacon as the kite swooped down toward his plate. "It's enough that *I* do."

"You're not being logical, Jeremy."

"I was logical my whole life, and what did it get me, except some money I don't need and an incurable disease?" replied Jeremy. "Why don't you *really* look at Uganda sometime? This is a magical place, for all its problems. Spit a mango pit out the window of your Land Rover, and when you drive by six months later a mango tree has grown up. Amin and his successors virtually wiped out your wildlife, yet all the animals are returning. Terminally ill people suddenly get cured. So how can I not believe in magic?"

"There's nothing magical about Bibi."

"I think there is," said Jeremy. "Leave her alone."

"I *can't*," protested Elizabeth. "Not until I've studied her, and found out how she does it. We may never find anything like her again."

"Think of *her*," he said. "What kind of life do you think she'd have, shuttling from clinic to clinic, facing all those vampires in white coats that not even a mother could love?" He paused. "Let her stay in the bush. These people won't tell. Besides, you have me: a certified HIV-negative

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volunteer at your disposal." He stared unblinking into her deep brown eyes. "Let her go, Elizabeth."

"You know I can't. We could save *millions* of people." She zeroed in for the kill. "Or isn't that important to you, now that *you've* been cured?"

"You know that's not true!" he snapped heatedly.

He was going to say more, tell her how unfair that statement was, how no true friend would ever even suggest it. But a little voice in his head intervened: *Could she be right? Am I just pretending to believe in Bibi's powers? Do I really feel now that I'm cured that no one else matters?*

He searched his soul, which he had not done for a long time, because he hadn't especially liked what he had found there. This time he couldn't find what he was afraid might be lurking in its darker recesses.

Well, I know it's a lie, he thought with satisfaction; *no sense trying to convince you, too.*

"All I know is that we're going to dig ten more graves tomorrow morning," responded Elizabeth, "and ten the day after that, and ten the day after *that,* and we're going to keep digging them until we've either beaten this disease or every last victim has died. Now, here's a woman who may, just *may,* have a cure for it. Do you really think I can let her go?"

He stared at her for a very long moment. "No," he said softly. "I know you can't."

"Then come with me while I search for her," continued Elizabeth. "She helped you. Maybe she won't be so frightened if she sees that you're with me."

He stared at his plate for a long moment, considering his answer. The kite hovered overhead, and finally settled for a scrap of bacon that had fallen in the dirt by the fire.

"All right, I'll come," he said at last. "But we won't find her."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because you're antithetical to her. She's magic brought forth from the spirit of this land, and you're science and logic and doubt educated thousands of miles away."

"Science will save a lot more people than *she* can once I find out just what it is that she does," said Elizabeth.

He shook his head sadly. "You still don't see, do you?"

"See what?"

"Science *needs* her," said Jeremy. "*She* doesn't need science. Never has, never will." He sighed deeply. "You and she are oil and water, and your worlds touch only briefly in passing. That's why you'll never find her."

"We'll see," said Elizabeth grimly.

They spent the next three months following up every rumor, every imagined sighting of an old woman who performed feats of medical magic. They scoured the Virunga Volcanoes and came away empty-handed.

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They thought they found her tracks in the foothills of the Mountains of the Moon, but they never saw her. They stopped back at camp only long enough to take on fresh supplies, then went to the arid semi-desert in the north of the Karamojong country, and west to the aptly named Impenetrable Forest. They spent a week at Murchison's Falls, only to discover that the old lady they were tracking was a Buganda witch woman who was missing an eye and part of an ear.

Everywhere they went they questioned the local people. Far from showing the symptoms of the "Thinning Disease," almost all of them glowed with health and fervently denied ever having seen anyone who remotely resembled Bibi. Jeremy got the distinct impression that they were secretly laughing at the two relief workers.

Finally Elizabeth admitted defeat and returned to camp. Jeremy tended the sick and the dying for another week, and then asked to see her privately.

"Well?" she said, when the two of them were alone in her tent.

"I've made up my mind," he announced. "I'm leaving."

"You mean you're going home?"

He shook his head. "No, I'm staying in Uganda."

"Then I don't understand . . ."

"All we're doing here is prolonging doomed lives," said Jeremy. "I came here to *save* some."

Suddenly Elizabeth's eyes widened with comprehension. "You're going out after Bibi!"

"That's right."

"But we've just spent three months looking for her. What makes you think *you* can find her?"

He didn't want to answer that, for fear of hurting her, but finally he did. "I'll be alone."

"You think that makes a difference?" she said caustically.

"Yes, I do." *Okay, so you can't be hurt if you don't believe.*

"You're a fool!" she snapped. "Where will you go? In what direction will you look? How will you feed yourself?"

"I'll get by," he said. "And I won't have to find her. *She'll* find *me*."

"You'll starve to death, or run into a leopard or a hyena, or drink the wrong water or eat the wrong food," said Elizabeth. "You can't survive alone in the bush."

"I didn't realize you thought so little of me," he said wryly.

"It's because I think so much of you that I don't want you dead."

"It's my decision—and if AIDS can't kill me, neither will anything else this land has to offer." He withdrew a handwritten document and placed it on her table. "This turns over all my investments to the camp." Suddenly he grinned. "The Notary Public's hut wasn't open for business today, but I think it'll stand up in court."

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Elizabeth walked to the door of the tent and looked out at the busy camp, then turned back to Jeremy. "You're giving everything up for a dream. Won't you reconsider?"

He shook his head. "If I reconsidered, I might agree that it was nothing but a dream and stay here. And then I'd miss the chance to help her perform her magic."

"We don't need magic," she replied impatiently. "If this crisis is solved, it will be solved by science."

"To me it's *all* magic, and who's to say that yours is any more potent than theirs? Science couldn't cure me, but Bibi could."

"Damn it, Jeremy, you're chasing a will-o-the-wisp. She's just an old woman, not some mythical creature with awesome powers of healing."

"She cured me with a bite," he said. "How can I not believe in that?"

"We don't know that that's what cured you," insisted Elizabeth. "She could have administered any number of medications while you were delirious."

"She could have," he agreed. "But she didn't."

Elizabeth paused and look at him sadly. "Isn't there anything I can say?"

"Yes," he replied. "Say 'Good luck.' "

She was still staring at him silently as he left her tent.

Bibi walked through the bush, senses alert to the hidden presence of predators. There were so many children, far more than she dreamed possible. She could feel their cries, their hunger, their pain, and she knew that she had much work to do before she could rest again.

Suddenly she heard a twig break, and she crouched, ready to race to safety. A man was approaching noisily, making no attempt to hide his presence, frightening birds and monkeys with every step.

Her first inclination was to run, but some secret instinct made her stay—and then she saw a familiar face, a face that reflected the unselfish love that was written across her own.

"Hi, Mom," said the man, holding a dried apricot out to her. "I've brought you a present." ●

We appreciate comments about the magazine, and would like to hear from more of our readers. Editorial correspondence should include the writer's name and address. Letters can be E-mailed to 71154.662@compuserve.com or posted to Letters to the Editor, *Asimov's*, 1540 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10036. Letters may be shortened and edited for publication.

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CURSE OF THE SOLIPSIST'S WIFE

She knows that to him
she is nothing more
than a figment
of his imagination,
a consistent figment,
a fiction all the same.

And there are times
when his belief
lowers upon her
with such weight,
sounds home with
such resounding force,
she feels her self
shrinking away.

She momentarily believes
the sum of her existence
is nothing more than
a fragment/figment/fiction
of the ongoing shadow-play
that inhabits his mind.
All the world she knows,
appears to her as shadow kind.

Rock, blade, gun, potion:
no matter how she kills him,
she fears his demise
will somehow trigger her own.
She could suddenly
vanish in a snuffed instant.
Faster than pain.

—Bruce Boston

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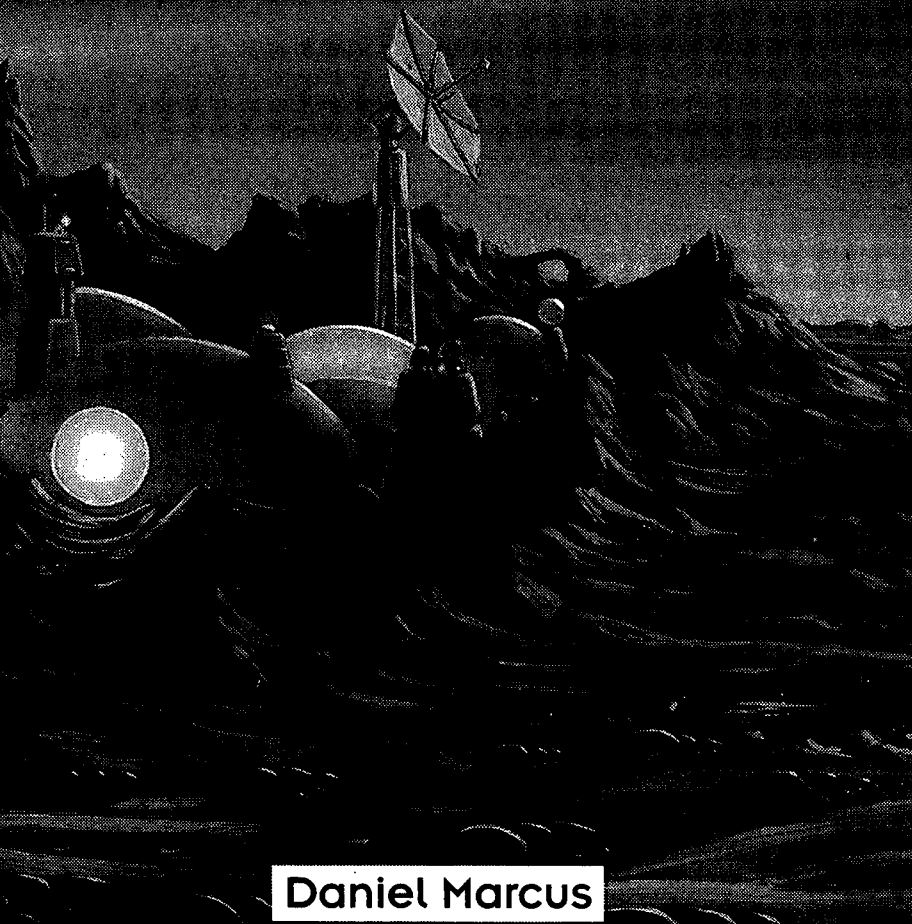

Daniel Marcus

EX VITRO

With a few short story sales to *Asimov's*, *F&SF*, and *SF Age*, Daniel Marcus has made a sharp splash in the science fiction field. His hard-hitting tales landed him on this year's John W. Campbell ballot for Best New Writer, but Mr. Marcus isn't resting. His powerful new story takes a brutal look at life on a research station millions of miles from home.

Illustration by Mike Aspengren

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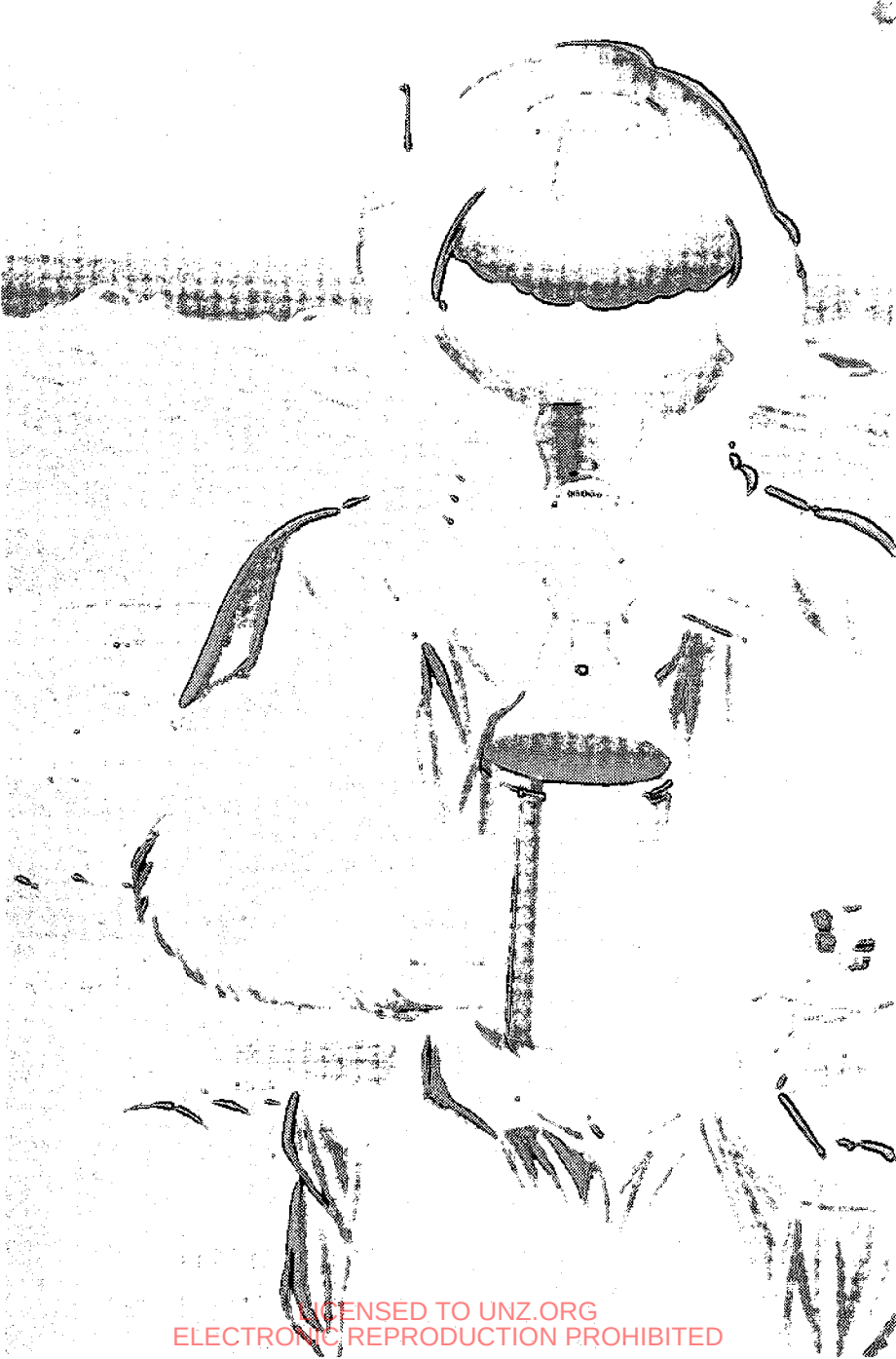

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I

The communications room was a weird place. Jax wanted to hunch his shoulders against the close metal walls, against the silent machines that smelled faintly of ozone and heat. An array of yellow telltales glowed steadily on the panel over his head; the blank, grey screen hung before him like an open mouth. The one decoration in the barren cubicle was a software ad-fax Maddy had taped to the wall—INSTANT ACCESS, some sort of file-retrieval utility, the first word highlighted in blue and the letters slanted, trailing comb-like filigrees denoting speed.

There was something that drew him to the place, though, and he caught solitary time there whenever he could. He imagined himself a point of light on the far tip of a rocky promontory, a beacon rising above a dark, endless ocean.

Jax heard a sound behind him and turned around. Maddy stood in the doorway. She had been working out, and her shirt was damp with sweat. Ringlets of dark hair framed her face; red splotches stood out high on her pale cheeks.

"What's up?" she asked, still a little short of breath. "I didn't hear a comm bell. . . ."

"Nothing," Jax replied. "I'm just hanging. Fog's really bad—we can't even watch the slugs."

Maddy shrugged. The slugs didn't interest her much—anything that happened on time-scales shorter than a thousand millennia slid under her radar. Titan itself, though, was to her like a blood-glittering, faceted ruby to a gemologist. Ammonia seas, vast lava fields laced with veins of waxy, frozen hydrocarbons. She was taking ultrasound readings to map the moon's crust and mantle. Jax had never seen her so engaged, but the news from home was like a tidal force pulling at her from another direction. "Anything new on the laser feed?" she asked.

Jax knew that, decoded, the question was, "War news?" Or more specifically, "How bad does it have to get before we can go home?"

She had family in the EC, in Paris, and the information that came in on the feed was frustrating in what it withheld. It was like deducing the shape and texture of an object by studying the shadow it cast in bright, white light.

They did know that a couple of days ago, PacRim had lobbed a mini-nuke at one of the EC's factory-continents in the Indian Ocean, claiming a territorial incursion. The EC had followed suit by vaporizing Jakarta. There had been some sporadic ground combat in New Zealand and Antarctica and a lot of saber-rattling, but no further nuclear exchanges. The North American Free Trade Coalition and the Russian Hegemony were sitting back and waiting, urging restraint and dialogue in the emergency League session and keeping ground and space defenses at full alert.

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"PacRim's been making noises about a nova bomb, but nobody really thinks they're *that* crazy. Naft's warning everybody off their wind farms in the South Atlantic—that's not exactly news, not since Johannesburg." Jax shook his head. "The Net's going completely apeshit, of course. Traffic volume's sky high . . ."

She took a step toward him and he stood up and put his arms around her. They stood like that for several minutes, their breathing merging slowly to unison. She smelled of sweat and of the hydroponics media she had been working with earlier that morning. The taut, lean muscles of her back relaxed to a yielding firmness under his hands. She began to move against him, and she gently pushed him back into the chair.

"Wait," he said. "Not here. Let's go to the pod."

Maddy nodded without speaking and turned around, reaching behind her back for his hand. He took it and trailed her down the narrow corridor. They passed other passageways branching off, leading to sleeping quarters, the galley, the labs. At the end of the corridor, standing like an abstract sculpture, was a gleaming, twisted piece of obsidian Maddy had brought in from one of Titan's lava plains. Oxidation from the station's atmosphere gave its surface a rainbow sheen. A rude step was carved into its side with a hand laser. Above it was a round, open hatch. Maddy let go of his hand, stepped up onto the rock, and pulled herself through. Jax followed behind her, emerging into a crystalline bubble surrounded by a sea of swirling mist.

They had grown the pod from a single crystal into a transparent, 5-meter hemisphere. It was light and thin, but strong enough to keep out the deadly hydrocarbon brew that was Titan's atmosphere. The fog was beginning to thin a little, and through it Jax could see the frozen landscape glittering in tenebrous, diffuse light. He caught a glimpse of a herd of slugs on the shore of the nearby ammonia sea. Their shiny, chitinous bodies were scattered across the lava beach in a rough pattern, like sheared concentric diamonds, slowly shifting.

Maddy had already taken her clothes off, and she stood facing him, waiting. Jax stepped out of his shorts and put his arms around her again. They stood there, rocking slowly, then together they sank to the carpeted floor.

When Maddy came, a shuddering ripple passed unseen through the pattern made by the slugs' bodies. Jax's pleasure shortly afterward sent another wave passing through the pattern from the opposite side. The ripples collided and scattered, each leaving an imprint of its shape on the other.

Jax gently disentangled himself from Maddy, trying not to wake her. She groaned softly once and rolled over, then her breathing returned to normal. Her face was relaxed and completely expressionless, as if sleep were a black hole from which nothing of herself escaped.

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For an instant, it looked to Jax like the face of a perfect stranger, its contours so achingly familiar that the familiarity itself was something exotic. He reached out to touch her, and his hand hovered above the curve of her cheek, trembling slightly.

So strange, he thought, the two of us out here, middle of nowhere, ties to home nothing more than electromagnetic ephemera. Ghosts. What *are* we to each other in the absence of context? We create our own, always have.

They'd met when they were graduate students at the Sorbonne, Maddy in planetary physics, Jax in system dynamics. They were both driven to succeed, the shining stars in their respective departments' firmament of hopeful students, and they gravitated toward one another with the same intensity that fueled their research.

They cycled through several iterations of crash and burn, learning each other's boundaries, before they settled into a kind of steady state. Still, their relationship felt to Jax like a living entity, a nonlinear filter whose response to stimuli was never quite what you thought it was going to be.

Individually, they were excellent candidates for SunGroup, a system-wide industrial development consortium—mining, pharmaceuticals, SPsats, all supported by a broad base of research and exploration. As a couple they were perfect for one of Sun's elite research teams. When they finished out their three-year term, especially if they had "made their bones" by discovering something of interest and potential profit, they would have enough clout in SunGroup to command their own programs.

The slugs were certainly of interest. They were at the apex of Titan's spartan ecosystem—black, almost featureless bullet-shaped creatures about the size of dogs. Methane-breathers, they basked in the shallows of Titan's ammonia seas and fed on anything organic—the primitive lichen that grew in sporadic patches on the moon's rough surface, the glittering chunks of hydrocarbon ice scattered like moraine across the landscape, even each other.

Jax could watch them for hours. They exhibited behavior not unlike schooling or flocking, merging in geometric clusters, shifting, forming new patterns. Individually, they seemed less sensate than bees; their central nervous system consisted of nothing more than a small knot of ganglia at the wider end, where there was a cluster of light-sensitive vision patches. They were living cellular automata—each responding only to nearest-neighbor stimuli. Collectively, though, from the local interactions, there emerged a complex, evolving pattern.

The fog was thick again, a uniform shroud. It seemed to glow with a dim, pearly light of its own. Jax wondered about the slugs outside, what they were doing. He closed his eyes and in that darkness he imagined a slowly shifting pattern of glowing points, an elongated oval surrounding a hard, geometric figure of sharp edges and straight lines.

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II

Maddy took another leaf from the small pile of lettuce in the colander and put it in her mouth. The taste was so bittersweet *green,* so substantial and earthy, that it brought tears to her eyes.

"The new crop of lettuce is really good," she said. "I think I finally got the 'ponics chemistry down."

"About time," Jax said. He looked up from the catfish he was cleaning. Fresh from the tank-farm, its bright organs spilled out on the cutting board. Blood streaked his hands and the smell of it was strong and sharp in the little galley. "The last batch had that weird, rotten aftertaste. I kept waiting for the cramps to start."

"Well, *fuck* you, then." The words seemed to materialize in the air between them, as if they had come from somewhere separate from her. She felt color rising to her cheeks, but there was no place to go but forward. "Anytime you want the job, you just say so."

Jax looked startled and hurt. He wiped his cheek, leaving a bloody streak, and bent down to his work again. His large hands were quick and sure. Maddy could feel the tension between them like a third presence in the room. She took a deep breath and let it out. Again. In, I calm my body. Out, dwelling in the present moment. In, listen, listen. Out, the sound of my breathing brings me back to my true self.

She took a step toward him and put her hand on his arm. He looked up. She kissed his cheek, tasting blood.

"I'm sorry, baby," she said. "I'm a little wired out with the war news. I can't take much more of it." She bit her lip. "If it gets any worse, I'm going to want Sun to pull us out of here. I need to be near my parents."

"Jesus, Maddy, Paris is the last place we want to be if the shit really hits the fan—it'll go up in a puff of plasma." He paused when he saw the expression on her face and reached out to touch her arm. "I'm sorry, but you know it's true. Do you really want to move to Ground Zero?" He let his arm fall again. "Besides, if we abort, they'll nail us with a stiff fine and we'll never get them to back us again."

"We can afford it."

Jax shrugged. "We can afford the fine, yeah, but we'd have to start from scratch with another Group, and that wouldn't be easy."

"Maurice will swing it for us." Maurice Enza was their sponsor at SunGroup. A hundred-thirty-two years old, mostly cybernetic prosthetics including eyes and voicebox, still publishing in the theoretical bio-economics literature. Maddy revered him. Jax respected him, but privately thought he was something of a spook and had always kept him at a polite distance.

"Maurice may be as old as Elvis but he isn't God."

Maddy closed her eyes. In, I calm my body. Out, listen, listen.

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She opened her eyes and looked closely at him. His face was open and earnest. He wasn't just being an asshole or doing some kind of power thing.

Maddy smiled gently. "Let's just see what happens, okay?"

The catfish was delicious, its flesh moist and white, the Cajun-style crust black and redolent with spice. The lettuce tasted sweeter with the fact that she had grown it with her own hands, nursed from a rack of seedlings in a carefully tended nutrient bath to full, leafy plants, their tangled roots weaving through their bed of saturated foam.

They ate together in silence. A Bach violin concerto played softly on the lounge speakers, the melodic lines arching gracefully over the muted hum of the life support systems.

Strange to be so connected with the sensate, Maddy thought, these earthy pleasures, while we're in this tin can at the bottom of an ocean of freezing poison, a billion and a half klicks from most of the people I love. Where everything's falling apart. Listening to Bach, no less.

She shook her head. Cognitive dissonance.

Jax looked over at her and smiled. "What?"

"Oh, nothing, I . . . I don't know." She held her hands out in front of her, palms up, as if she were gauging the weight of an invisible package.

The veined rock flashed by her in a grey, flickering blur. Every now and then, she emerged into an open space for an instant and caught a brief glimpse of distant walls, stalactites and stalagmites merging in midair to form complex, bulbous shapes, ghostly green in the enhanced infrared. Then the bottom wall would rush up and swallow her again. A readout on the display in the lower left corner of her vision flashed her depth below the surface.

Maddy saw a fault open up off to her left and she steered her way over to it by opening the right-hand throttle of her jetpack, a bit of Buck Rogers kitsch she'd coded up to contextualize the virtual a bit, give it some tactile reference. Too easy to get disoriented otherwise—sim-sick.

She followed the fault down toward Titan's core, passing through large black regions where her mapping was still incomplete. The fault twisted and turned, opening at times to a wide crevasse, then narrowing down until it was little more than a stress plane in the tortured rock.

She slowed down and pushed a button on the virtual display. Three-dimensional volume renderings of the stress field in the rock appeared all around her as glowing lines, fractal neon limbs cascading into smaller and smaller filamentary tangles. She filtered the display until all she saw were the glowing tangles against a field of deep, velvet blackness. The fault itself was a tortured sheet of cold fire.

She hovered there in the darkness, surrounded by light. *This* is what I

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know, she thought. *This* is familiar. She could as well have been in a geosimulation of the Earth's crust. The equations of elasto-plastic deformation are invariant under acts of God and Man. Stochastic, fractal, extraordinarily complex, the solutions could still be understood, predicted with some reliability, projected onto a lower-dimensional attractor for a smoother representation.

All well and good as science. As personal metaphor it had its drawbacks. Maddy knew people back home whose lives were distressingly simple—work, family, sheep-like pursuit of leisure all fixed, remorseless basins of attraction with no fractal boundaries. They eluded her, whatever drove them completely foreign. Her personal trajectory was constrained to a more chaotic topology.

With a corner of her awareness, she could feel her realtime body, helmeted, visored, ensconced in a padded chair in a darkened featureless room.

And in the lab, cocooned in biostasis, the embryo, a radiant point of light in her mind's eye. She could imagine the impossibly slow heartbeat, just enough to keep it suspended above the threshold of death. In quiet moments, she imagined that pulse to be her own, could feel her awareness contract to that tiny lump of blood and meat, miracle of coded proteins. One part Jax, one part Maddy. Something other than the sum of its constituents.

It was usually bearable, her awareness of it a dull, constant pressure in the back of her mind. But sometimes she felt an ache in the deepest part of her, as if it had been torn from her leaving a bleeding, septic cavity. How could it live apart from her? Or she from it? She would tell Jax soon.

III

He turned off the suit speaker. The sibilant whisper of his breath and the deep ocean surge of blood music in his ears rushed in to fill the silence. Titan's daylight sky arched over his head like a great inverted bowl, deep cyan overhead fading to a bruised purple around the horizon. The photochemical smog was thinned to a gauzy softness, a blurring of focus, and Sol hung overhead like a bright, fuzzy diamond. He could almost feel the weight of Saturn's presence suspended unseen in the sky, shielded by Titan's bulk.

He had walked about a klick along the shore. The station was no longer visible behind him and he felt exhilarated with the solitude. A herd of about twenty slugs had been pacing him as he walked, oozing along almost like a single organism. He hadn't been sure at first whether they started trailing him or he them, but he was certain they were aware of

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him now. When he stopped, they did. He walked another few steps along the rocky shore, and the herd moved along with him like an amoeba, extending a long, thin pseudopod which was then reabsorbed into the main body. This was the first time they had exhibited anything like a response to an external stimulus. Like *awareness.*

What *are* you? They stretched out before him, attenuating into a long, sinuously curving line, like an old river.

He closed his eyes and concentrated as hard as he could. *Tell me what you are.*

In his mind's eye he saw the pattern, a meandering line of bright sparks, ripple slightly. He opened his eyes.

Tell me.

Another rippling wave passed through the line.

He turned on his radio. "Maddy. Can you suit up and get out here. I want—"

"What the fuck have you been doing? I've been trying to reach you for the last hour." Her voice sounded tight and thin.

"I turned off the speaker. I—"

"Can you get in here?" Long pause. "Please?"

The holotank was on, but she was staring off into space. In the transparent, glass cube Jax could see ghostly, flickering images of fire and smoke.

"—retaliated with a 50-kiloton airburst over Manila. The latest estimates of the death toll—"

"What's going on?"

She looked up at him. Her eyes were puffy. "Paris."

He felt the word almost like a physical blow. "Shit. Where else?"

She shook her head. "It's all coming apart. Naft and Russia have managed to keep out of it so far, but it's just a matter of time."

"—emergency session, but no word yet from the CEO Council —"

"Anything from SunGroup?"

She shook her head again. She had the look of an accident victim— hollow eyes, slow, deliberate gestures.

"—ground forces overwhelmed Mitsubishi troops outside Sydney. Conventional theater weapons—"

Jax waved his hand sharply over a panel on the wall. The volume of the newsfeed decreased to a murmur. The holotank still flickered and glowed with the images of burning cities. He walked over to her and put his hand on her shoulder. She sat there stiffly, as if unaware of his presence; her shoulder felt as if it was made of wood. He put his other hand there and started to knead the tight muscles, but she shook him off.

He stood behind her for a long time, not knowing what to do. Every now and then, Maddy let out a long, shuddering sigh.

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Finally she looked up. "What are we going to do?"

He shrugged. "What can we do? We can survive here indefinitely—the station ecology's intact and stable. We continue the research, wait for SunGroup to pull us out of here."

Even as he said it, though, Jax felt a rush of panic at the thought of leaving. He closed his eyes and a matrix of points, white on velvet black, pulsed and flowed. Concentric diamonds, slowly shearing. He opened his eyes and Maddy was staring at him.

"Continue the research? What for? We don't even know if there *is* a SunGroup anymore. We have to find out what's left back there, get back if we can. We can *help*."

Jax was silent for a long time. "What we need to do is survive, Maddy," he said slowly. "Keep the systems green, keep the research going. I'll try to raise Maurice, find out what their status is, but I don't know when they're going to be able to get to us. I think we're pretty much on our own."

"If they can spare a ship, I want to go home," Maddy said. "Luna, one of the O'Neills, I don't care. Our place right now is back there."

Jax forced himself to smile reassuringly. "All right, Maddy, we'll see what they can do. We'll have at least three hours until we can get a reply—"

"—a hundred-seventy-four minutes—"

"—providing we can get through at all. The Net is probably stone dead, all those e.m.p.'s." He gestured toward the holotank. "That stuff is probably coming in relayed from one of the O'Neills. . . ."

"We can't really tell what's going on back there from the newsfeed—the information entropy is sky-high. We're not going to know until we ask someone who knows something. Let's just do it."

Together they walked down the corridor to the communications room. Jax logged on, set the protocol, and transmitted Maurice's address from memory.

He faced the blank screen. A section of it elasticized invisibly, ready to transform his voice into digitized bits and hurl them up to the relay satellite waiting at one of Titan's Trojan Points. There was no return visual, of course—dialogue was impossible.

Whenever Jax transmitted across the lightspeed gulf separating him from Earth, he had the sensation that his words were disappearing down a well. He could feel Maddy's presence behind him like a hovering cloud.

"Maurice. This is Jax and Maddy calling from Titan Station." Obviously. Where else would they be calling from? "Please advise us as to your status. We—"

"Pull us out of here, Moe," Maddy cut in. "Please. We want to come home."

Jax shot her an annoyed glance and turned back to the screen. "Please

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advise," he repeated. "End."

Ignoring Maddy, he tried to log onto his WorldNet node, but couldn't get a stable carrier at the other end. Tried routing through Luna, through Olympus Mons, through the O'Neills.

"Nada," he said, shaking his head and looking up. Maddy was gone.

He looked in the lounge. Empty. In the holotank, a pair of translucent figures gestured in animated conversation, but Jax couldn't make out the words. Galley, labs, sleeproom, all empty. Finally, he walked down to the end of the corridor and pulled himself up into the pod. The fog nestled against the dome in thick, soft swirls. Maddy lay curled up on a foam pad, breathing deeply.

He walked past her to the edge of the dome and peered out through the fog. He could just see them, stretched out in a slowly undulating line next to the ammonia sea. The undulations grew until the line broke apart, the segments forming a series of rings. Slowly, one at a time, the rings merged and the pattern segued to a nest of concentric diamonds, slowly shearing. There was sense and meaning to it, he was sure, but comprehension hovered just out of reach. *What are you?*

The soft chime of the comm bell shook Jax out of his reverie. *Three hours? I've been standing here for three hours?* He looked around the dome, his eyes coming to rest on Maddy lying in a fetal curl, her shoulders slowly rising and falling. He stepped over her and lowered himself down the hatch.

There was no visual, but Jax recognized the flat inflections of Maurice's voice synthesizer.

"Sorry about the visual—we're under severe bandwidth restrictions. Power rationing, too, so I'll have to be quick. The fighting's almost over, except for a few hotspots. Earth is pretty much of a mess—Europe, Japan, Indonesia . . . latest estimates say a billion dead. Naft came through pretty well. Russia, too, but they're going to take a lot of fallout from PacRim. SunGroup is putting together a group at O'Neill Two, sort of a reconstruction team. We can use all the help here we can get, but we also need to keep the long range research efforts going. Your call, but frankly, we could use you. We're sending a ship out to make a sweep of the research stations, anybody who wants to come back. Old ore freighter from the Belt, retrofitted with an ion drive. Best we can do right now. Let me know what you want to do. We don't want to burn up the delta vee to get out to you if we don't have to."

Jax listened to the spectral hiss of interplanetary white noise riding over the carrier hum. He played the message back again. The words began to merge together, their individual meaning softening like heated wax. He played the message back again.

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IV

She hovered on the knife-edge between wakefulness and sleep. Images of smoke and flame, of exploding suns, chased each other across the surface of her consciousness. She was on a hover-barge on the Seine, sitting in the back at the controls. Sharp smell of moss and damp stone as she passed under a bridge. Her parents and sisters on the deck in front of her, sitting beneath a blue-and-white umbrella. Sipping drinks, laughing. Low grey clouds holding the threat of rain.

Suddenly, an impossibly bright light swelling from the east, a second sun breaking through the clouds. The umbrella bursting into flame, her family instantly transformed into stick figure torches. The Seine was *boiling,* bubbling up over the sides of the barge. . . .

She opened her eyes. Jax's face hovered above her in the half dark. He put his hand on her arm.

"Dreams?"

She nodded, still gripped by the vision. "Yeah."

Jax stroked her arm. "I heard from Maurice," he said after a moment. "We're on our own, Maddy. He has no idea when they'll be able to get to us."

It was like a physical blow. Her tropism for home radiated up from the very center of her, from her First Chakra. Its denial sent a surge of panic through her.

She closed her eyes. Breathe, breathe. In, I calm my body. Out, my breathing returns me to my true self. In, breathe calm, white sun swelling in the East. Out, listen, listen, Seine bubbling up over the sides of the barge. In, centuries old stone bridge sagging molten soft. Out, pillars of flame dancing on the deck of the barge snuffed by hammer wind.

"Maddy." Her eyes fluttered open again. "Are you all right?"

She looked closely at him. His long, thin face, so familiar, composed in a mask of concern.

Slowly, she shook her head. "No," she said. "Nothing's all right."

Maddy hadn't worn her environment suit in weeks and it chafed under her arms and between her legs. She looked back at the station, so out of place in the alien landscape, clinging in the tattered mist to the dark rock like a cluster of warts. The pod glittered in the dim light. She imagined Jax back there, his sleeping form sprawled naked across the foam pad.

She still ached slightly from their sex. He had been fast and rough, almost brutal. She didn't care, had lain there limply, receiving him. Her orgasm was joyless, passing through her like a wave, leaving no trace of itself.

When she got to the shore of the ammonia sea, she stopped. Small ripples lapped up against the rocky beach. She looked down at the canister

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she was carrying. Featureless, burnished metal, such an innocuous thing.

Without further thought, she pressed a recessed button on its side. A thin line appeared around the top rim and a puff of vapor escaped, freezing instantly into a cloud of scintillating crystals. She unscrewed the lid and shook its contents out into the sea. Shards of metglass webbing, spidery strands of plastic tubing, chunks of brittle, frozen foam. She couldn't even see the scrap of flesh they cradled. A few meters away, a small herd of slugs clustered near the shore in a senseless and inchoate sprawl. ●

THE GLASS DOLL

I have a chip on my shoulder
and a sharp tongue.
Little girls never own me.
I am liquid supercooled,
I am every delicate wish
spider-eyed, snow cold
to the touch.
I am watched and envied by
goblets of fine crystal
in the china cabinet.
Gravity offends me.
I wear only silk
and am appraised as
too fragile.
No one will play with me.

—Wendy Rathbone

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NEXT ISSUE

Next issue we start another year of top-of-the-line, State-of-the-Art, Cutting Edge science fiction stories here at *Asimov's Science Fiction*. In recent years, stories from *Asimov's* have won twenty-three Hugo Awards and twenty-one Nebula Awards, as well as many World Fantasy Awards, *Locus* Awards, *SF Chronicle* Readers' Awards, and Sturgeon Awards. Its editors have won nine Hugo Awards for Best Editor, and *Asimov's* itself has won the *Locus* Award for the Best Magazine in the SF field for an unprecedented seven years in a row, winning again in 1995. And the Austin Chronicle has called us "the most consistently innovative and readable SF magazine on the newsstands today." If you're a long-time reader, you already *know* why. If you're new to the magazine, why not subscribe today, using our ad on the inside back cover. Stick with us through the upcoming year's worth of great *Asimov's* stories, and we think we can *show* you what all the excitement is about, starting with our very next issue:

JANUARY COVER STORY

The popular and critically acclaimed **Walter Jon Williams** returns after too long an absence with an evocative and gorgeously colored look at the bizarre, ritualized, and mannered world of court life in nineteenth century China—and at how that world is shattered catastrophically forever when the Forbidden City itself is attacked by a very strange and very formidable set of "Foreign Devils."

BIG-NAME AUTHORS

Hugo-winner **Joanna Russ** returns with her first new SF story in more than ten years, this one a smart, fast-paced, charming, and very funny look at a very unusual kind of "Invasion"; popular British writer **Paul J. McAuley** takes us sideways in time to an Italy that *might* have been, to witness "The Temptation of Dr. Stein"; and veteran author **Tom Purdom** paints a hard-hitting, disturbing, and sure-to-be-controversial portrait of what goes on in the mind of a relentless and determined "Cider."

EXCITING NEW WRITERS

L. Timmel Duchamp takes us for a trip down an ominous and all-too-likely turning on the Information Superhighway, as she details some of the consequences of "Bettina's Bet"; **George M. Ewing** examines the *extremely* unexpected results of a prank at a techie's picnic, in the hard-edged and high-tech thriller "Pyros"; and **Eric T. Baker**, making his *Asimov's* debut, takes us to a troubled future Iceland for a front-row seat in a dangerous bit of street-theater that comes to you "Live from the Occupation."

UNIQUE FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column muses about "The Twentieth Century Battery"; Norman Spinrad's "On Books" column talks about "Keeping the Faith"; plus poems, cartoons, and letters.

Look for our January issue on sale on your newsstands on December 5, 1995, or subscribe now and make sure you don't miss any of the great stuff we have coming up for you in 1996!

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John Brunner

ALL UNDER HEAVEN

Illustration by Laurie Harden

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English writer John Brunner has traveled extensively over the past couple of years. He started out at home as a featured speaker at Southhampton University's annual writers' conference in April 1994. In May he was a guest of honor at the European SF Convention in Timisoara, Romania. In September he was the only British speaker at a scientific colloquium at Châteauvallon, France, and he recently returned to the U.K. after engagements in the United States and Canada. "All Under Heaven" is part of a rapidly growing series of stories set in the homeland of his wife—Chinese artist LiYi Tan.

In the spring of this year there was a great fall of stars, whereat the emperor and the people were much perturbed . . .
—*"Annals of the Middle Kingdom,"* scroll XXIII

When the party from the distant capital came to Bu Zhuo, Chodeng was helping his uncle Pi-li to mend the roof of the Lai Dao temple, the shrine of the Town God. The work was not urgent, but it and similar tasks helped to stave off boredom during the endless-seeming dry months when it became obvious why the little town had acquired its ironical name, "sometimes rice." The snows had long melted off the high ground to the north, though owing to the altitude they often endured until midsummer, and the lie of the land to the south was such that at this season moist air was forced to shed its rain before reaching here. Prudent management, plus two never-failing wells sunk under the direction of a long-ago *fung shui* master, ensured there was always water to cook with, and for humans and their livestock to drink, but there was nothing like enough to irrigate the paddy-fields. Parched and cracked between the dry ditches, with shriveled stalks left over from the spring harvest punctuating their surface like pinfeathers on a carelessly plucked bird, they were the haunt now of a few lame ducks, their webs pitiably torn, reserved to breed from when autumn brought clouds anew.

They had also hosted frogs, though those had of course been eaten. More, however, would appear once the now-empty Min Lu He filled again.

The newcomers followed the riverside road from the south, which did in the strictest sense continue beyond the town but past this point could barely be called a path, thanks to a succession of landslides. They were preceded by a mounted soldier bearing a dragon banner on a long pole, signifying that they came on business for the ruler of "all under heaven." Then came foot-soldiers, with business-like halberds and scabbarded swords, commanded by a mustachioed man who must be a senior officer, perhaps even a general, for over his leather and bronze cuirass he wore an elaborately embroidered silk square depicting a tiger. It was sight of

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him that stirred from their heat-induced lethargy those of the residents who preferred to laze all day in warm weather—Pi-li was forever grousing how numerous they were—and inspired young people and especially children to rouse up and follow as they entered the town. One or two, more energetic than the rest, hurried ahead with the intention of alerting Hundan, the mayor as everybody called him, though in fact he held no formal office—just owned more land than anybody else hereabout, being therefore unenviably well known to the one imperial envoy who regularly paid visits to this isolated community, the tax-collector. The courtesy title helped him endure the latter's depredations with better grace.

However, it was not the sight of a real general that drew Chodeng's eyes, screwed up against sunglare despite the shade afforded by awnings of woven rice-straw. He was far more struck by the other recognizably important member of the little troupe, a man of middle age clad in a rich silk robe and sporting a round hat surmounted by a peacock feather, upon whose saddlebow reposed the unmistakable red-lacquered box of a scribe's compendium. Even in this remote corner of the empire there was no need for banners to identify such a person as a scholar who, successful in the imperial examinations, had cut himself off from whatever his roots might have been—for in the eyes of the examiners all candidates were equal, peasant or landowner, craftsman or monk—and risen to great heights in the service of the state.

Yet (and this was what distracted Chodeng completely from the task in hand) it was not this eminent personage, as might have been expected, who was enjoying the benefit of a broad umbrella with a gold fringe of near-imperial density borne by a surly-looking fellow trudging in his wake. No, its shade was being lavished on a mule that bore a much younger man also wearing silk, a clerk no doubt, lolling back and forth on his saddle, mouth ajar as though gasping for air. What could account for such an improbable—indeed improper—turn of events?

Chodeng's speculations were cut short by a loud roar.

"Nephew!"

He returned to the here and now with a guilty start. His uncle was glaring up from ground-level across a pile of newly delivered tiles, bundled with rice-straw rope to prevent them cracking on the way.

"I know what you're dreaming of! Running off to strange remote places like you've read about, tagging along at the pony-heels of someone like that old codger over there!"

The diagnosis was so accurate Chodeng didn't even attempt to reply.

"Well, you're not getting the chance! Your father, my elder brother to whom I owed the same allegiance as our father had he been alive, left your portion to me"—here it came, the same old song, over and over—"with instructions to raise you in a secure trade with a secure future. Maybe your mother had different ideas, but she's dead too, let me remind

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you—and in any case who pays attention to what women say? And what makes you think the life of a scholar is secure? Maybe for that guy it is, with a post at court and an escort of soldiers when he takes to the road! But you, who couldn't even hope for a job as a village schoolmaster? Don't make me laugh! Now drop the hoist-rope and haul this lot up! Put your back into it!"

As he sweatingly complied, Chodeng thought of the dreams he had so long cherished, and wished his mother were still alive. His father had felt much the same way as did his uncle about learning and examinations, but one of his mother's cousins, when she was a little girl, had scored an amazing success through his elucidations of the works of K'ung-fu-tze and been advanced three civil ranks at a single go.

Of course, the incumbent emperor had then carried out a purge of dissident intellectuals, so in the end . . .

By now the little procession had wound past, its rear brought up by pack mules laden with baskets for grain and jars for wine and water, that made the onlookers forget the brief though welcome distraction afforded by the strangers and remember only how their demands would yet further diminish the stores the townsfolk must rely on until autumn. Already there were mutters of complaint, and he could not find it in his heart to disagree.

He sighed, and applied himself dutifully to roof-tiles.

By sunset lodgings had been found for the general Kao-li and his scholar-companion Bi-tso, plus a couch for the latter's clerk, sick with fever following an insect-bite and clearly too ill to travel on. The common soldiers were billeted in barns and sheds. A banquet of sorts was in preparation for the former group, featuring salted river-fish and wind-dried duck, at which the so-called mayor was to play host; and albeit unwillingly rations had been provided under imperial requisition for the rest of the strangers: pickled turnip, pickled cabbage, and millet-cakes instead of the decent rice the wealthier folk were reluctantly sharing with the group's leaders, but better fare than one might have expected given the condition of the surrounding land.

There was, however, a problem irking the general, on top of his conviction that it was high time he was allowed to retire to his country estate, for age made him stiff after riding for even a hour, let alone all day as he had had to ever since leaving the capital. At some stage they had traversed one of the invisible linguistic frontiers that crisscrossed the empire, testimony to the way it had been cobbled together from—so legend claimed—seven mutually hostile states. In this town not only the pronunciation but the words people used rang strangely in the visitors' ears. In principle *wen*—script—was shared by all the empire's subjects, and had been since its standardization by the First Emperor, Qin Shihuang;

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in practice, that reform's usefulness depended on finding people who could read and write, and there was not even a schoolteacher here, only the elderly blear-eyed priest in charge of the temple. He could make shift at deciphering a few ancient texts; he knew the "family books" of the community more or less by heart, so people turned to him for guidance when naming a child or choosing a favorable day for a wedding or to build a house; and for lack of an alternative he was relied on by Hundan to interpret new regulations when a decree was brought from the capital—which happened increasingly often as the emperor's ambition spawned ever greater need for tax-money and forced labor.

But as an interpreter the fellow left much to be desired. As much, say, as did to persons from the imperial court these rough-hewn pine benches cushioned with straw pads, these floors of trampled dirt, these clumsy timber huts idiotically sited if not downhill then indubitably downwind of the place to which the local privies drained. . . .

At length, in exasperation, Kao-li shoved aside the dishes before him—causing a momentary panic among the mayor's wives and the other womenfolk who had been drafted in to wait on the distinguished visitors and who had brought their finest porcelain with them—and shouted, "Is there no one in your miserable town who understands civilized speech?"

There was a moment of dead silence. Then, from the shadows at the extreme end of the grain-store where they were assembled, the only room large enough in the whole of Bu Zhuo, a quavering voice offered, in an absurdly flowery style, "Many there are whose spirits quail at the prospect of encountering a general, for his reputation on the field of battle makes one think at once of blood and death."

Bi-tso, who had been on the verge of drowsing after not merely a tiring day but a tiring week, jerked abruptly back to full awareness, just as Kao-li snorted, "What high-flown rubbish is that? I can't understand it any better!"

"Wait, cousin," Bi-tso interrupted. "He's quoting a poem. And very aptly, what is more. This is an improbable discovery. Come forward, you!"

Chodeng complied nervously, very conscious of how he must look to these exalted gentry: a scrawny, somewhat under-tall boy of seventeen, who had had neither time nor water to cleanse himself after his day's labor at the temple.

"Who is he?" the general rumbled. But he was addressing Hundan, not the boy directly.

"No one of importance," fawned the mayor.

"You can say that twice!" roared Pi-li, afraid perhaps of losing his unpaid helper. "He's an orphan with a headful of ridiculous dreams—"

"So once was I!" snapped Bi-tso, jolting erect on his uncomfortable seat. "Now I am an uncle of the emperor!"

The company fell silent, abashed.

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"Draw closer, you. Tell me about yourself."

Trembling, Chodeng recounted how his mother and father had disagreed about his future and in the end both had been puffed away by a wind that bore pestilence. There were sighs and nods from others present who had similarly lost friends and relations. Bi-tso listened intently.

"I see," he said at length. He was employing the refined speech of the capital with far more subtlety and precision than the general who presumably was accustomed to the rough usage of army camps. "Well, then! As well as quoting poetry—with not too bad an accent, let me say—can you make clear to these rustic oafs the reason for our presence? And persuade them that the sooner they help us on our way the less we will trouble them?"

"What's he going on about?" Hundan grumbled. Chodeng found himself being urged to the center of the room, at the very focus of everyone's attention. He had to swallow hard and often because his mouth was dry from sheer terror, until a signal from Bi-tso led one of the attendant women to pass him a cup of hot barley-water. After it he felt better.

Gaining confidence, Chodeng explained. Instantly concluding that he enjoyed fluent command of both dialects, though it was far from the truth, Kao-li overwhelmed him with a rush of detail. It was less obscure and allusive than what Bi-tso was saying, yet Bi-tso—clearly more accustomed to the exigencies of translation—had to come to his rescue. In the end they worked out a compromise, and by the time they finished Chodeng found himself more than a little astonished both at what he had accomplished and also at the mission these travelers were committed to.

Their presence was due to an event everyone in Bu Zhuo remembered save babes in arms. In mid-spring there had been "a visitation of dragons"—at any rate, that was how people referred to the brief but brilliant shower of falling stars that had been seen, so they now found out, as far away as the capital. Legend held that after such a display of celestial fireworks one might occasionally find pieces of stone bearing the marks of intense heat. Whether they had actually fallen from heaven was debatable, there being many who insisted it was impossible because the essence of heaven differed from that of the earth. It was partly in order to settle the argument that Bi-tso had exploited his influence as father of the emperor's current favorite and organized this party to investigate. Whether the fallen stones would prove to be composed of some strange celestial substance seemed to him unlikely; however, he did suspect they might contain metals so rare that if he did not seize this opportunity he might be doomed to join his ancestors without ever enjoying a chance to investigate their properties.

And, so it had been established by a month of long-range inquiries, if any stones had fallen they must have struck on the high ground immedi-

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ately to the north of Bu Zhuo. Thither the party was bound, and apart from needing to replenish their rations they had stopped here to learn as much as possible about the remainder of their route.

That provoked long faces. In the distant past, so Hundan explained via Chodeng, there had been trade with a village to the north—there was no actual town worth mentioning—but more than a generation ago landslides had closed the pass, since when nothing had been heard of the imperial subjects formerly said to be living in that direction.

It was doubtful whether they could be thriving, at all events. The name of their village was even worse-omened than Bu Zhuo's, for it was Gan Han, meaning something like "never enough water." What the inhabitants had chiefly traded was pheasants and other wild game in exchange for rice, because they lacked the water to grow their own. They had even been obliged to buy straw now and then.

"Can pack mules negotiate the pass?" Bi-tso leaned forward, staring not at Hundan but at Chodeng. The boy stumbletongued in embarrassment. How to render into the polite speech of these strangers his vague recollections of what he had been told about that long-neglected road? Some claimed that, given a valuable enough consignment, mules could be used to re-open the trade; others, that it would call for men, but even so it would offer a profitable boost to Bu Zhuo's economy during the dry months when the upper reaches of the Min Lu He were most passable. In early summer, of course, they became a succession of violent rapids.

However, before he could reply Kao-li intervened with a soldier's bluffness, demonstrating that he had thought the matter through faster than Chodeng.

"Even where a packhorse cannot go, a man may!"

At the prospect of the town being called on to furnish porters there was general dismay. The general cut it short.

"You have all that much to occupy you in this time of drought?" he gibed. "We didn't see convincing evidence of the fact when we entered your hamlet this afternoon! Still, I gather we are tolerably close to our goal, and in a situation of potential danger I would rather rely on trusted comrades than unwilling conscripts!"

He swept the assembly with a glare. Having contrived to make them feel relieved and insulted at the same time, he resumed.

"Nonetheless we shall need to make ourselves understood when we arrive. What do the people at Gan Han speak—the same barbarous gibberish as here?"

"General! It would be an honor for me to act as your interpreter!"

The words escaped Chodeng before he could bite them back. Pi-li looked instantly furious. The general, on the other hand, gave an approving nod, and Bi-tso grew positively benign.

"I rather expected you to say that. Mayor, he has already performed a

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valuable service and now he is offering further help. Has he been given his dinner?"

"Ah . . ." Hundan's stock of words ran out and he signed no.

"Then find him a bowl and fill it."

Overwhelmed, Chodeng accepted the savory-smelling food and a pair of chopsticks. Before recovering enough to taste it, though, he had an inspiration.

Turning to his uncle, who was scowling worse than thunderclouds, he held out bowl and chopsticks with a bow. From a dry mouth he said, "General—uncle of the emperor—if my father were present I believe all would expect me to share this gift with him. The brother of my father accepted me when I was orphaned and has made me his apprentice. I owe to him the fact that I have a trade."

And waited.

"Well said," Bi-tso pronounced at last.

"Granted," rumbled Kao-li. "Yet it is for us, about the business of the Son of Heaven, that you are to perform essential duties. You, boy, not your uncle. Eat and drink."

For another long moment Chodeng hesitated. The expression on Pi-li's face made his feelings abundantly clear.

Let's hope the pass is negotiable and I don't have to return home before his temper has a chance to cool!

"Boy, I said eat!" the general boomed. "We don't want you fainting on the road!"

Faced with this direct order Chodeng could only give a wan smile and ply his chopsticks.

While he was eating things happened with rapidity quite out of keeping with the summer heat or the usual pace of events at Bu Zhuo. In particular, it occurred to Hundan and the old priest that if Chodeng was to be absent the community's tax-liability ought to be reduced. Furthermore, as Pi-li pointed out, a fair wage must be agreed for the boy's services, of which if he failed to return there might well be some balance owing, that would need to be passed on to the next-of-kin, meaning himself. . . .

When had it been agreed that his offer of help should be taken so literally?

In no time at all, it seemed, for here was a neatly drafted contract being presented for him to apply his chop. Embarrassed all over again, he had to confess that he didn't own one, but redeemed himself by asking for brush and ink and executing the characters appropriate to his name accurately and with a flourish. To the scholar's lift of an eyebrow he murmured only, "My mother."

Interestingly, Bi-tso did not seem to find it odd that he had been instructed by a woman. They must indeed arrange things otherwise elsewhere in the empire.

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"Now off to bed with you, young fellow," rasped the general. "We shall need you at first light, or rather, an hour before. Bring some of the sort of clothes you wouldn't expect to need at this time of year. We may well encounter snow beside tomorrow's route."

Snow? Just by climbing the next range of hills? Yet there was no hint of a joke in the general's tone, or even his eyes. It began to dawn on Chodeng that he was about to enter a very different world.

One, to be precise, where snow could be found in summer and stones could fall from the sky.

Later, when Chodeng looked back, he found it incredible that so many events could be crammed into a single day.

Despite scarcely having slept for excitement, from the moment the group set off, he being mounted on the mule previously assigned to the sick clerk, he could not prevent himself from plying Bi-tso with questions. The scholar not only tolerated the interrogation but even told a few wry anecdotes that did much to lighten the journey. However, well before mid-morning the pressure of reality started hindering the flow of words much as tumbled rocks beset their route. As the sun climbed higher in a cloudless sky, and as it became increasingly plain that the light-colored patches beside the track ahead did in fact betoken snow in summer, the going became one continuous struggle. Of countless shades from ashen-grey to sandy-brown, vast irregular boulders filled and overflowed what a scant month ago had been the bed of the Min Lu He, but was now completely innocent of water.

Just as well, Chodeng found himself thinking. Picturing how his mount would slip and stagger if the rocks beneath his hoofs were awash in a torrent, he had to shudder.

And although the air felt chill, the sun's rays beat his head as cruelly as any teacher's fan.

Long past the point at which even Pi-li would have permitted a respite for a sip of water Kao-li insisted on trudging upward. Then came a bend where one of the pack mules fell under its load, screaming horribly as it broke a leg. There was nothing to be done but slaughter it on the spot—saving the meat, of course. Its load was taken over by the soldiers, glum but resigned, and even as they shrugged the burden on to their shoulders the first buzzards caught the scent of blood and came wheeling to investigate.

Chodeng clambered down from his saddle to free his mule for other duties. To Bi-tso's look of inquiry he responded with a shrug.

"Frankly, master scholar, I feel safer on two feet than four."

"If I were your age," Kao-li grunted, overhearing, "so would I!"

Yet within the hour he found himself regretting his decision. In straw sandals, his feet were ill-protected against the increasing coldness of the

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ground, and he envied the Mongol-style felt boots most of the soldiers owned. Occasionally untrammeled, more often called on to help push and pull a horse or mule over a tricky stretch, he learned how badly he could ache in muscles he had not hitherto known he possessed.

Somehow, grimly, he kept going.

Midday slipped by, the sun declining from the zenith. It remained bright but its radiance lost its heat. The true temperature of the mountain air struck through. Chodeng found himself shivering despite the exertion of scrambling up this rock-blocked watercourse. . . .

Up?

Of a sudden, it dawned that in fact the going was easier, and not merely because they had at last cleared the final rockslides. Bi-tso was drowsing in his saddle but not completely asleep. Sensing Chodeng's change of pace at his side, he roused.

"We must have crested the ridge," the boy whispered. "We're going downhill again. At least I think we are."

From his position a few paces to the rear Kao-li gave a snort.

"Haven't traveled much, have you, young fellow? If we're truly going down, how come the riverbed still parallels the track? No, the crest of this ridge is still a long way off, somewhere up that way." He pointed at a cwm branching off to the west. "But we're not climbing any more. We're on the level, which can often give that illusion after a steep ascent."

Bi-tso was gathering his wits. Now he cleared his throat.

"There are few records at the capital concerning this area. It was last surveyed in the time of the Silk Emperor." That, Chodeng remembered, had been a century or more ago. "But it seems likely that we are approaching a plateau. Also, last night, I was able to question the priest at Bu Zhuo—after you had gone to bed, young fellow," he added in a stern tone. "He made himself understood, more or less. At any rate his temple records proved more comprehensible than his normal gibberish. He said something about people living where the road and the river divide. I suspect we can look forward to reaching our destination at latest by sundown."

He added with wry irony, "Which, Chodeng, for your information, occurs later on a high mountain than in the valleys below. You should be able to calculate why."

For no reason he could think of, save that the sun had been fierce all day in this thin air, the boy felt his face glow burning red. He disguised embarrassment by reclaiming his mule.

Minutes later, however, as the party turned aside from the watercourse and continued on what suddenly became a level track, all else was wiped from their minds at the sight of the improbable spectacle confronting them.

This was the place called Gan Han, "not enough water"? But it was

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green! Its clustered buildings, although any of them would have been regarded even in Bu Zhuo as little better than a cattleshed—than a kennel for a guard-dog!—were ringed by paddies where rice bent grain-heavy heads, where frogs leapt joyously, where clipped-winged waterbirds scurried madly along the irrigation ditches always striving and always failing to take off. . . . Why, the very air seemed impregnated with radiance like a *boddhisattva*'s nimbus in a temple painting!

Chodeng gasped aloud, but instantly checked himself, expecting to be chided by Bi-tso for his ignorance of other lands and even other towns. The older man, though, and even the general, appeared to be equally taken aback. As for the military escort, who had by now been able to restore their loads to the surviving pack mules (the one required to carry its fellow's meat was braying in near-human protest), they were frankly gawping.

"Is this what your study of the records led you to expect?" Kao-li muttered.

"Not in the least," confessed Bi-tso. "What are we to do?"

The answer had already presented itself. Down among the irrigation ditches there were people at work: not as many as one might have expected in view of the size of the cultivated area, but a few here tending the rice-plants, a few more there opening and closing earthen dikes to redirect the water, yet others by pairs driving and netting ducks. Growing aware of the strangers, they were gradually discontinuing their tasks and staring at the hillside. Realizing what was likely to be required of him, Chodeng swallowed hard against what all of a sudden felt as much like timidity as fear. Were there not girls working in the paddies alongside the young men?

And was one of them not shamelessly staring at him, and calling her friends to make them notice he had noticed her, while he wriggled with embarrassment and diffidence?

Of course, he had to admit she was extremely pretty: not just her face, but her legs too, as he could plainly discern because to wade in the paddy she had rolled her trousers high above her knees, and back on dry land had not bothered to lower them again.

"In the name of the Jade Emperor!" Kao-li exploded. "What's become of young men in this run-down generation? I never saw a finer pair of come-hither eyes! It can't be because her feet aren't bound, surely!"

"I should hope not!" Bi-tso chimed in. "It's a vile custom! It's only because my wife insisted—" He broke off. However, the fact that his daughter was the emperor's current favorite had already made it clear that he had lost that particular argument.

"I hate it too," Chodeng whispered. "My father married my mother because hers weren't." He forbore to mention that his father had scornfully declared that women with bound feet not only couldn't work to support

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their families but also gave themselves airs above their station.

"Then seize your chance, boy!" Kao-li boomed. "Go down and tell them who we are and where we come from."

"It'll have to be you," Bi-tso stressed apologetically. "We don't speak the local dialect and we mustn't risk any misunderstandings."

Chest swelling with pride, struggling with all his might to disguise the tension that threatened to make him faint, Chodeng dutifully made to dismount, only to be checked by a sharp command from Kao-li.

"Fool! A mounted man, even on a mule, is always at an advantage!"

So he rode toward the girl and her by now numerous companions, mortally afraid at every pace that he might fall off.

And spoke to her and the others, and tried again, and again, and at length, with a face as long as a winnowing pole, rode back to report, while the locals strove not to giggle.

"Well?" rasped Kao-li.

"You didn't need to bring me along," the boy said dully. "They don't speak my dialect, like at Bu Zhuo. They hail originally from your part of the country. They were sent here by another route on the orders of the last emperor because this land was empty."

"Empty?" Kao-li exploded. "Rich and fertile as it is?"

"Yes, as a punishment."

"A punishment? When it yields such bountiful harvests, while towns like yours roast in the sun and starve? Who do they think they are, to mock the agents of the emperor, the superior man who rules all under heaven?" He was working himself up into a fine fury.

Suddenly Chodeng felt extremely tired. He answered without the circumspection prudence dictated.

"I don't think they care much for emperors. After all, it was an emperor who deported their families here. At the time, apparently, this area was a real desert. They say—"

Bi-tso could contain himself no longer. "We don't need to learn any more about this place to be sure we would rather go home. It's unnatural! Such fertility, such luxuriance in the midst of mile after mile of barren rocks! Cousin general, do I not speak for us both? But do they know anything about the visitation of dragons? About the—"

"That was the next subject we discussed," Chodeng cut in.

Bi-tso blinked. "Are you sure we mean the same thing?"

"The fall of stars?"

"Yes, of course. What—?"

Quite heedless of respect due to his elders, Chodeng snapped, "What did you think I meant? I know that's what has drawn you here, so it was the next thing I asked about, as soon as I realized they speak your dialect and not mine."

"And—?"

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"And they said they've been expecting you or someone like you and it's high time you got here. But . . ." He hesitated.

"Go on!" Bi-tso rasped.

"I didn't completely understand what they were trying to tell me. Something about how it's only because there was a fall of stars that they now have plenty of food and water."

Bi-tso blinked in puzzlement. He hazarded, "Could they mean that searching for stars that might have reached the ground they discovered a new spring?"

"No, not at all. What they meant, I think, was—"

The banner-bearer interrupted. As Chodeng had learned during their ride, he had served as a cavalry sergeant under Kao-li in more than one battle and consequently might risk addressing him in more familiar terms than a civilian.

"Looks like you're going to have a chance to find out directly, general. There's a whole gang of locals heading this way.

"And bringing something with them the like of which I never set eyes on before."

Can this be how a dragon looks? The question sprang unbidden to Chodeng's lips, but Bi-tso spoke before he had time to utter it.

"A phoenix? Are there still phoenixes in our decadent age?"

Mention of such a legendary, powerful creature dismayed their escorts. They exchanged glances eloquent of apprehension, only to be distracted a second later as the pack animals caught—what? The scent, perhaps, of what was approaching. Or maybe they saw it, or detected strange vibrations in the air, or registered its approach by some sense too fine for coarse humanity. At all events it frightened them, and for the next few minutes the men had all they could do to prevent the beasts from shucking their loads and bolting.

Had Chodeng had room in his mind to spare for such matters, he would have been astonished at the way, even though his mount was trying to imitate the rest, he himself clung to his reins and somehow contrived to remain in the saddle while fixing most of his attention on the amazing apparition keeping pace with the locals as they drew near. A phoenix, was it? Well, if a scholar so identified it. . . . On first seeing it he had at once felt a dragon to be more likely. Yet—

Yet was he seeing it at all? Seeing it in the customary sense of the term? Somehow he felt not. Somehow he felt, when he tried to stare directly at it and focus its image, to get rid of the shiny hazy blur that seemed like a concentration of the strange luminosity he had already detected in the local air, what he had mentally compared to the nimbus round figures in religious paintings, that the—the creature wasn't there to be seen. Not *there* there. Nearby. In a perceptible location. But not

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there in the sense that one might walk, on his own sore human feet, to where it was. One couldn't judge how tall, how wide, how deep from front to back. . . . In fact, apart from the bare fact of its existence, one could describe it in no terms whatsoever!

He wrenched away his fascinated gaze. He was the only one. General, scholar, bannerman, escort, all were alike transfixed. Yet the party from the village wore expressions of superiority and amusement, not excluding the girl who had first smiled at him. By now they numbered a couple of score, those who had been at work in the paddies—young folk in their teens and twenties—having been joined by older citizens. Beyond, in the village, many others were coming into view, ranging from babies in their mothers' arms by way of craftsmen emerging from their workshops to elderly folk hirpling along on sticks.

Could this be some sort of conjurer's trick? They wore the right sort of smug expressions. . . .

Summoning all his self-control, plus all the self-respect that would be undermined if he were to make a fool of himself in front of such a lot of people—by now as many as had gathered to greet the imperial party at Bu Zhuo, he estimated—he called out, unable to avoid addressing himself to the girl he had already talked with . . . but she really was very pretty.

"The distinguished scholar Bi-tso who has led us here under the protection of the esteemed general Kao-li, wishes to know by what name you call this—uh—phenomenon." He felt sweat breaking out all over his body; he could have said what he wanted to say with no trouble in his own dialect, but his command of words these people would understand was strictly limited. However, he could essay one more sentence.

"Do you consider it a phoenix, or would you class it more in the nature of a dragon?"

And it answered.

It answered.

How it was possible to tell, Chodeng had no idea, except that in his brain there came a sudden something like a bitter wind, that nonetheless bore the implication of identity and beyond that tantalizing hints of meaning. He felt as though too many words had been spoken in too short a time and he must decipher them at painful length from memory, or as though he had suddenly been handed an examination paper in a subject he was unprepared for.

Further evidence: the soldiers threw their weapons down and fled.

Chodeng too wanted to dismount and run, did not, and failed to decide whether he was held back more by reluctance to be shamed, or scholarly fascination . . . or maybe he was simply paralyzed by fear. He hoped his willingness to recognize that last possibility might stand to his credit in

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escaping the karmic wheel.

And wondered at the same time whether the very wish implied vainglory. . . .

He was snatched back to the present by a bark from the general.

"They ran, you stood your ground! Well done, young fellow! But have we had the answer that we wanted?"

Dry-mouthed—and dry-crotched; he was surprised he hadn't wet himself—Chodeng stared around. Under the shining mist the villagers were laughing, swapping inaudible jokes, pointing at the fleeing soldiers and imitating with dance-like elaboration the gait of the pack mules. There was a pause like the one between the lightning and the thunder.

During it, he found the pretty girl was shyly gazing at him.

Something said (only it wasn't speech, more like a kind of *wen* inscribed directly on the paper of his awareness, that he understood without having had to study the characters):

#I have long awaited educated persons. These folk are kindly but with minds confined by ignorance. However, now two from your capital city are here I find that one is honored for slaughtering his own kind and the other has spent his life convincing himself of untruths.#

Chodeng set one hand giddily to his forehead. This time he did have to dismount. For a moment he lost contact with reality, so dazzling was it to find he could already (it must be by being taught and how could a dragon, how could a phoenix—

#NEITHER, but it was brave of you to ask the question for it shows you were prepared to entertain the difference of me from you#

(convey so much NEW knowledge in less than an eyeblink?) understand the messages arriving directly in his brain. Except that that was wrong and he had no time—

#indicating that I was correct in addressing you the same way I appealed to this girl when, desperately injured, I was driven to issue an emergency signal summoning the inhabitants to abandon all else and tend my welfare until I began to recover.#

—to analyze because implications were still storming in.

He sought permission to organize his thoughts. Received it.

"You fell to earth among the falling stars."

It marched into consciousness like childhood memories.

"To stay alive you forced these villagers to obey your orders."

A sense of flinching. Then bravado, as it were: #If not I would have died.#

Sudden addition: #How do your people like dying far from home, far from their ancestors' graves?#

For an instant Chodeng was tempted to sympathize. Then, somehow, he stopped. He realized someone else's fingers were grasping his. He was much more accustomed to physical signals than to mental ones.

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It was the girl with trousers rolled above her knees who held his hand. Her eyes could not convey clear messages the way this someone from the stars had done within mere moments. (Background; silent shouts like chanting monks, so perfectly in unison their words were always clear. #Do as I say or else I shall die. Do as I say or else I shall die.#) Chodeng had not yet had a girl, though he had lusted after many. On the way he had made what he thought was indirect allusion to the matter when chatting with Bi-tso, and been amazed at how much more casually the old scholar spoke of fucking women and even boys than Pi-li or any other adult in Bu Zhuo.

He was resolved he wouldn't die until he—*had*.

Would this girl here. . . ? She was, one must admit, extremely pretty. . . .

Yet though she clung with fervor to his hand, pressed it against her breast so that beneath her jacket—it was unquilted—he felt the rounding swell, the hard peak, and he in his turn felt that he was hardening . . .

#I paid them back for all the help I had required. You need only look around. Were you not led to expect a dry and barren land with people starving on it?#

"Stop!" Chodeng cried aloud. Of a sudden the experience of having instant chunks of knowledge driven into his brain like a forester's wedge being used to split a log became unbearable.

Respite. He found himself exhaling in a gusty sigh.

Cautious, the girl let go his hand and took half a pace to the rear, her large eyes remaining fixed on his face.

"It is different from us," she whispered. He understood at once. Fearing what might happen when he was exposed for the first time to the force of the strange being, to which the villagers had been able to adjust by degrees for at first it had been weak and injured, she had kept him literally in touch with humanness, shameless though she might be called for what she'd done. He felt unspeakably grateful.

But dared not touch her again to show the fact. How could he tell which of the other villagers, who had now assembled close by in a compact crowd, was or might be her father, her mother, her brother, her intended? And already angered by her act of kindness?

Another question sprang to his mind. How were his companions taking all this? One thing was plain: the soldiers were getting over their panic and sullenly recovering the mules and their burdens, though odds and ends had been spilled. Kao-li and his ex-sergeant, the bannerman, were giving them the tongue-lashing of their lives, vying for supremacy in imprecation. Chodeng was secretly impressed.

Bi-tso, however, was looking baffled and unhappy, which bewildered him. Why should not a scholar be overjoyed to encounter a celestial being, though it was neither dragon nor phoenix? Could he not look forward to being remembered for a thousand years as the discoverer of a wholly

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new type of creature, as famous as the legendary sage who evolved the art of divination from the patterns on a tortoise-shell, or even Fuxi who devised the art of writing? Who could tell what marvels this meeting might portend?

He ventured a question, daring to use the familiar honorific "grandfather." To that extent he had guessed right; Bi-tso took no more offense than if a favorite pupil had employed it—indeed, marked it with a twitch of his mouth that might have been intended for a smile. His answer, however, explained his patent unhappiness.

"It seemed to be trying to tell us"—a momentary hesitation—"that it comes from beyond the realm of the emperor."

Briefly that puzzled Chodeng; then he realized. The emperor was said to rule all under heaven, and the not-dragon-not-phoenix claimed to hail from . . . Well, the impression that had been planted in his mind felt more like an ocean crossed with a desert but overtones of extreme distance were undeniable. Also it contained stars that not only shone but felt hot. For some reason he found that oddly convincing. Above the sky, then. He looked politely expectant, waiting for the old man to go on.

"And that's impossible!"

"Forgive my duncehood, grandfather, but why?"

"The authorities are agreed on the matter. Therefore the whatever-it-is must be lying. Which further confirms my conclusion. Heavenly beings are incapable of lying." He folded his arms on his chest defiantly. "Which proves my case!"

#I think rather it proves mine.#

This time and from now on the information insinuated itself into Chodeng's mind, rather than being slammed there in one painful chunk.

#They are too rigid for me to communicate with. You are young and open-minded like the girl who has helped me until now. But your party is tired and hungry. I shall withdraw.#

The visitors were organized again, soldiers holding the heads of the mules, the general back beside the scholar, the bannerman hoisting anew his dragon pennant.

"This is my father Tai Yu," said the pretty girl, indicating a man of early middle age with a deeply lined face and a wisp of beard. At some stage she had rolled down her trousers again but her feet were still bare and Chodeng found his gaze being drawn back and back to their shapely natural arches. "He is our headman. My name is Tai Ping. We think you must be tired and hungry. Come with us."

No one commented on the fact but there was no longer any sense of alien presence. The radiance had faded from the air. Yet Chodeng suspected that the being had not in fact departed. Tai Ping's words were too close to what he had just read/heard within his mind.

In flowery language Bi-tso accepted the offer of hospitality. The gener-

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al gave a grunt that might be interpreted as concurrence. They headed down the gentle slope between the paddies and entered the village.

This was much like, yet very different from, the imperial party's reception at Bu Zhuo. There was no luxury whatever about the accommodation; they were all to be quartered on planks with straw pads that made Bi-tso groan quietly at sight, though the makeshift huts made vacant for them permitted at least a modicum of privacy through hangings and partitions. There was, by contrast, plenty of water and plenty of fuel. Wooden tubs stood ranked in the open air, the evening being nippy but not cold, and the visitors were invited to strip and climb in while the girls and women poured over them hot water by the bucketful.

Chodeng could not quite decide whether Tai Ping was trying to glimpse his body through the water when she cast down her eyes, or merely being maidenly and modest. Either way, he was glad it proved opaque enough to conceal the visible evidence of her effect on him.

Then bowls of wine were delivered with bows and flourishes, and that had an unexpected consequence. Being scrubbed and massaged by a brawny farmer's wife, Kao-li burst into song and astonished everybody. He had a fine voice, and for so large a man his high notes were remarkable. When he finished there were cries for more.

But Tai Yu smilingly intimated that, as it was nearing sundown, they had better use for their fuel than replenishing the hot tubs yet again and would rather cook dinner. At the prospect of good fresh food the men erupted from the tubs like buffaloes from their wallow, splashing the girls who fled, laughing, some of them not without a backward glance. Tai Ping, Chodeng was glad to see, departed at a stately pace, not turning.

The contrast with Bu Zhuo increased when the meal was served. Here was no porcelain, only brown and in some cases unfired clay pottery, and they had to eat kneeling or squatting. But what was dipped or lifted from grill-racks or from huge old cauldrons was amazing. Even at the end of the rainy season back home, when the best and last of the spring crops were reaching the table, Chodeng had never tasted such delicious food: rice fresh from the paddy, duck killed and plucked since their arrival, patties stuffed with sweet mashed beans, tea so aromatic that it filled the air like fields of flowers. . . .

Also there was more wine, of which he accepted three bowls. He hadn't tasted it before but he didn't care how soon he tasted it again.

Since these people, or rather their forebears, had been deported to the plateau from a district close to the capital, because—as Tai Ping explained—the Silk Emperor feared they were plotting against him, there was no need for the services of an interpreter. The discussion between the general, the scholar, and the headman threatened to depart into ar-

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eas where Chodeng would have lacked vocabulary even in his own dialect. For a while he kept up gamely, catching especially references to Bi-tso's mission to find rocks fallen from the sky, if such existed. The locals assured him that they did, and had landed in a gully not far away, but they were of no ordinary stone, for where they were not scorched they were shiny, and of no color there was a name for. Bi-tso declared that he could not wait to establish whether they were merely of some unusual metal or whether they were truly of some celestial substance.

Significantly, though: it was the day following the fall of stars that the not-dragon-not-phoenix first manifested. As the newcomers had already observed, it was unlike ordinary animals, with its penetrable substance and illusory surface. There had been much debate concerning its nature but eventually the people had concluded it must be some kind of ghost.

At first they were very frightened, for it made them do things they did not want. It made them go to the gully and gather the bits of metal. Some claimed they were phoenix eggshell but the being could write directly on their minds and told them not to argue but dig up as many fragments as possible and bring them together. Some were buried quite deep. Hungry and thirsty, they worked at this task daylong until they dropped, and some did not rise again.

But then, one day, they returned from their labors and gasped in astonishment. Water was filling the paddy-ditches at a season when they should have been bone-dry. Almost overnight crops sprouted from nowhere, or perhaps from seeds dormant since last harvest. Frogs, ducks, carp, brought the waterways to life again. All of a sudden life at Gan Han was better than it had ever been.

But no one understood why. What did the distinguished gentlemen from the capital city make of these extraordinary events? Was there a connection? If so, what kind? Some said the being had come from the sky with the metal rocks. Others said it must be a mountain spirit roused by the impact, that had called on the people to dig painful splinters out of its body as one might pick gravel from a graze.

Gravely, Bi-tso reviewed the competing possibilities and added others of his own, and beyond that point Chodeng made no pretense of following.

The presence returned fleetingly to his mind, confirming that although now imperceptible it had never actually departed. He was to do something that might prove very hard, but in return he would be well rewarded. He would even receive some of the reward in advance.

He uttered a soft groan because the wine made it difficult to unravel the message. Clearly it had been aimed at him alone, for the older men were chatting as before and even Tai Ping assumed a mistaken reason for his reaction.

Taking his hand, she helped him to his feet and led him away. They

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moved through near darkness, their departure unremarked because throughout the evening people had been coming and going from the need to relieve themselves. Even Tai Yu paid no attention.

Thirty paces distant, her face inscrutable albeit visible because despite the absence of a moon the air was crystalline and there were sharp and vivid stars, she opened the front of his trousers with soft and gentle fingers. He had never had this service performed for him by a girl before, nor even heard of it being done. But he liked it. He liked it very much.

Except that by the time he finished awareness of where her hand was resting did as much to end the flow as the exhaustion of his bladder.

There was the echo of an echo of a complex medley of thoughts: a hint of satisfaction, of calculation, of exhaustion. . . . But the wine still made these impressions hard to analyze.

Without a word Tai Ping led him not back to the feasters but toward the largest and most solid house—her home, presumably. By now the night was chill, and during the brief walk the fumes of wine cleared from his head.

Then strangeness happened.

Even though at every step his bodily condition reminded him how close he was coming to fulfillment of his ambition, to graduating from boyhood to manhood, he could not help thinking of how her father, any father, would react were he to wake one day and find his daughter lying with a strange man. . . .

She opened the door. She stood aside and gestured him to enter. He caught her arm and swung her round so that the starlight shone full on her face.

Her cheeks were glistening. Down each there ran a narrow shiny runnel. He touched a finger to the left one, licked its tip and tasted salt.

After a small eternity he whispered, "You don't really want to do this, do you?"

Wordlessly she bowed her head.

#Do it. This is the pay in advance I promised to Chodeng.#

If a human had spoken, one would have said the words escaped involuntarily. As Chodeng digested the implications he became aware of so to say marginal glosses that enabled him to better understand the snatch he had caught a few moments before: plan made, so far carried out, lessening of vigor . . . Beyond that: stranded, error, violence, fury at the resistance of this soft inferior ignorant . . . There was almost no end to that one.

But Chodeng was left with one overriding conviction. It was unbefitting to corrupt a respectable girl against her will.

Something that could coerce human beings with its mere thoughts and wanted to spend Tai Ping as though she were a string of cash . . . Oh, it must be worse than any emperor! Worse even than one who could deport

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whole townsful of people to a barren plateau for conspiring to overthrow his rule!

Not uttering a word, he stumbled away.

And, seconds later, realized he did not know which way to head. He had expected to locate the feast again by ear, but everything was eerily quiet, as though the company had finished and dispersed.

At a loss, he turned back. There Ping stood before her home, in an oddly stiff posture. Only her arms were moving. She was unbuttoning her jacket, opening it, discarding it, bringing her hands to the waistband of her trousers. . . .

Yet the expression on her face was as vacant as a doll's.

#I cannot be mistaken. All my conclusions agree. The reproductive drive in humans as young as this is uncontrollable especially if they have never enjoyed the experience.#

She and he in the same moment cried out with the impact. He rushed toward her, seized her in his arms. Her skin was deathly cold. She clung to him, trying not to sob.

A blurt of petulance: #They must obey/help. They are the ones that must understand. The old folk here are content to call me ghost or devil. The newcomers believe they are well informed but what they know is either nonsensical or shameful. These have to be the ones! *Do as you're told!*#

This time the shock was giddying.

Yet it also conveyed an indefinable implication of fatigue. Chodeng somehow retained his feet. The girl turned away from his body, but kept his arm around her bare shoulders by grasping his hand, seeming to draw comfort from his presence. Side by side they stared in the direction of the gully where Tai Yu had said they would go tomorrow to see the objects from the sky.

The luminance like a saint's nimbus was back in the air. Now, however, it was so faint it could not have been discerned by daylight.

By degrees Chodeng's raging thoughts calmed. At length, as though expecting to be heard at that not inconsiderable distance (and indeed, should one not expect it wherever the radiance displayed?), he spoke aloud.

"Honorable creature, not dragon as I thought, not phoenix as the respected Bi-tso declared, I respectfully inquire: are you listening?"

There was a response of sorts: weak, sullen, resigned? He could not tell which element held the balance. He spoke on regardless.

"We obey the emperor who rules all under heaven. It is unseemly for any person save him to give us orders except with imperial authority."

He was vaguely aware that at his side Ping was brightening. She squeezed the hand she was clutching in front of her shoulder.

"For all we know there may be other creatures in other realms, but surely they must owe allegiance to rulers of their own."

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This time the response was something closer to a sigh. Of despair? He didn't want to think about that possibility, and hurried on.

"I think you must have been hurt because you were caught among stones as they fell from the sky, as one wading in a river may be hurt when rain looses rocks from the bank. I think you want to return where you came from but cannot do so without further assistance. I am certain that even the emperor would agree you have well repaid the people of Gan Han for saving your life. But you ought to have asked for what you need instead of trying to bribe me with the body of this girl."

She not only tugged his hand again but drew it lower to where his fingers could close on the bare skin of her breast. With her other hand she pressed it there, so he might be sure it was no mistake. He had done and said the proper thing.

How to conclude? Inspiration dawned.

"Having been honored by speaking with the scholar Bi-tso on my way here, a man I hold in high regard even though you think he has wasted his life learning about rubbish, I feel I am acting correctly. I trust the help you seek will be forthcoming. I shall do what little a nobody like myself can, to hasten it. But now I am tired and my companion is not only cold, she is half-naked, and I wish to return her garments. If you sleep, sleep well. In the morning my superiors will call on you and I will abide by their decision. Good night."

During that unintended, completely spur-of-the-moment speech Chodeng had sensed a change in himself. In a totally different way from what he had expected, he felt he had made the transition. He had begun this trip as a boy. Here he stood, as the stars wheeled past the midnight conformation and brought the world closer to the onset of another day, with the right to call himself a man.

He picked up Ping's jacket and helped her don it. Then turned away, prepared to sleep in the open if he could not find the lodging assigned to him.

Astonishingly, there was no need. Ghost-silently emerging from the half-open door of his home, here came the headman Tai Yu.

"Father!" Tai Ping snapped instantly back to life, rushing forward to embrace him. "Chodeng has been wonderful! He defied the—"

He cut her short. "Daughter, I heard what he said."

But—!

It had just occurred to Chodeng that he had addressed the being in his own dialect, and these people were not supposed to understand it, this being why his recruitment as interpreter had proved a nullity.

Yet—

He bit back the objection. Let the Dao unfold as it must. The headman was saying, "You refused the pleasure of my daughter's body even though, as I well know, she could not have resisted had you chosen oth-

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erwise. Enter my humble house. What we can offer in the way of comfort you shall have."

Giddy and confused, even though the last trace of the wine had long burned out of his system, he complied, and moments later was asleep.

In the morning;

Accompanied by the whole population of the village save the very old, the very young and the infirm, the imperial party—including Chodeng—trudged under a bright morning sky along a well-worn track toward the gully where strange shiny fragments lay scattered.

With her father's entire approval, Ping walked at his side.

As they went, Chodeng sought that curious radiance in the air. Now and then he thought he detected it; then again, a pace further on, he was sure he had deceived himself. At last Ping asked what was troubling him; he explained; and she nodded.

"Yes, it grows weak again. It was like this at first, after the rocks fell. It grew strong. Now it is as you feel."

How could this have anything to do with himself? Yet Chodeng could not escape the conviction that it was in some way his *fault.*

They crested a final rise, and while the accustomed locals continued onward the strangers halted in amazement. The descriptions they had heard yesterday had not prepared them for the spectacle of this narrow valley strewn end to end and side to side with gleaming masses. Where they were not scorched they threw back light and images, so that for a moment the soldiers gasped about ghosts and devils.

Then they saw there were only reflections of themselves from curved surfaces, polished as mirrors. But they remained unhappy, and no wonder.

Tai Yu had halted and was looking around in confusion. Weak but clear, a message was being written (again the image of *wen,* the script shared by all imperial citizens regardless of what dialect they spoke) on their awareness, but this time it was at close range and aimed at all of them whether or not they understood the implications.

#Chodeng is correct. I was caught among a storm of flying rocks the other side of your sky. Arriving in your world I could think of nothing else but staying alive.#

The radiance that had been so faint gathered strength anew. This time, however, they sensed it was not in itself the creature they were "listening" to, but only some kind of projection. The image came to them of the emperor's power: he himself did not have to be present for his subjects to obey him.

#Last night I was taught that you understand more than I assumed.#

Chodeng strove to remember what he had said and done, but the only reality remaining from that strange cold hour was the strong warmth of Ping's fingers intertwined with his.

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#When I ordered you to help I could think of nothing except survival. When I regained enough strength I thought to pay you back by making your streams full and your paddies fruitful.#

There were nods of cautious approval.

#Beyond that it was my intention to make you bring hither goldsmiths and other skilled workers in metal, who might with guidance repair what some of you took for the shell of a phoenix egg. Alas, I'm afraid in all my voyages I never met a phoenix.#

Ping gave Chodeng a sidelong glance. He realized they were sharing the same thought, a sense that this creature was rather engaging, whatever might be its nature.

And a second later wondered: *In its presence, can either of us be sure we are thinking our own thoughts?*

#It was my conviction that if they worked under my direction hard enough and long enough to repair my conveyance, they would retain such advanced skills as to make the Middle Kingdom the pre-eminent power among all the nations into which you ill-advisedly divide your species. We used to make mistakes like that until we devised the means of communication I am now employing. And—here is one of the factors that made me change my mind—I find you have some grasp of the need for superior communication. Even though you have to waste far too much of your youth learning it, *wen* at least foreshadows the solution.#

Chodeng saw Bi-tso bristle at the suggestion his lifelong studies might have been less than comprehensive. As for the general, he was gnawing the ends of his moustache.

#Without help I shall very shortly die. I could constrain you, even now, to obey me, but I would rather not, for exactly the reason that in the early hours of this morning a young man of your party declined to lose his virginity, which he despises, at the expense of a young woman who has been brought up to prize it. I thought because of your wars and your armies and your generals there was little hope of your species becoming civilized.

#I was wrong, and that is why I now come forth before you. Not a dragon, not a phoenix, not any creature from the domain your emperor lays claim to: "all under heaven"! Wait.#

The last injunction was superfluous. Not a man or woman, not a youth or girl, who had assembled in this valley scattered with amazing shiny artifacts not belonging to this world, could have done otherwise even for a single heartbeat than to stare as, seemingly from living rock, that which had been addressing them emerged.

Clutching Ping's hand so hard she winced and slacked his grip, Chodeng saw . . .

What was he seeing? He remembered his conviction that he could not walk on his own feet to where the being was. And realized he was watch-

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ing it make the opposite journey. From that elsewhere place where it could survive in solid rock it was emerging . . . and there was this sense that the emergence cost appalling effort . . . and—

And for the shortest, shortest moment, there it was.

And it was wrong. It was not. Not even phoenix; not even dragon. Simply not.

"Kill it," grunted Kao-li, and tugged the reins to turn his horse away. The soldiers rushed with spears and swords.

"But why?" Chodeng screamed at Bi-tso, who looked on with stony eyes.

"It lied by claiming to hail from heaven. Celestial beings do not lie. Also it has usurped the imperial privilege of directing forced labor. These crimes are sufficient to justify execution."

With surprising expertise he wheeled his horse and rode off in the general's wake. It was vain for Chodeng and Tai Ping to shout after him.

The color of the being's blood was other than red.

When it had been decided, owing to that unwholesome and unprecedented color, not to butcher the thing for its meat but leave it for the crows and buzzards (though they had not yet shown their usual interest), and after the proposal that suddenly erupted about offering these shiny oddments to the current emperor as phoenix eggshell, thereby purchasing a pardon and enabling return to their forebears' home, was just as swiftly met with the retort that life in Gan Han bid fair to become far better, with more rice, more fruit, more ducks, more wine—

Then they realized that those already in sight of the village had faltered to a straggling halt. Many were turning back, tears pouring down their faces. Some were beating their foreheads on the ground, tearing their hair, uttering curses, accusing each other of nameless faults and crimes.

Even before he and Ping forced their way to a point from which they could look down on what yesterday had been well-irrigated fertile ground, Chodeng had a premonition of what the vanguard had already seen.

There was no water in the ditches. There was no rice in the fields. There was brown cracked mud in the midst of which two sad crippled ducks quacked desperation at the sky.

And the latter discoursed eloquently, in a *wen* of sharp pure blue, about the long wait that impended till the autumn rains.

Tai Yu went mad. Chodeng took his daughter to Bu Zhuo and married her. But neither mentioned Gan Han again. ●

However, in the upshot nothing out of the ordinary occurred.
—*"Annals of the Middle Kingdom,"* scroll XXIII

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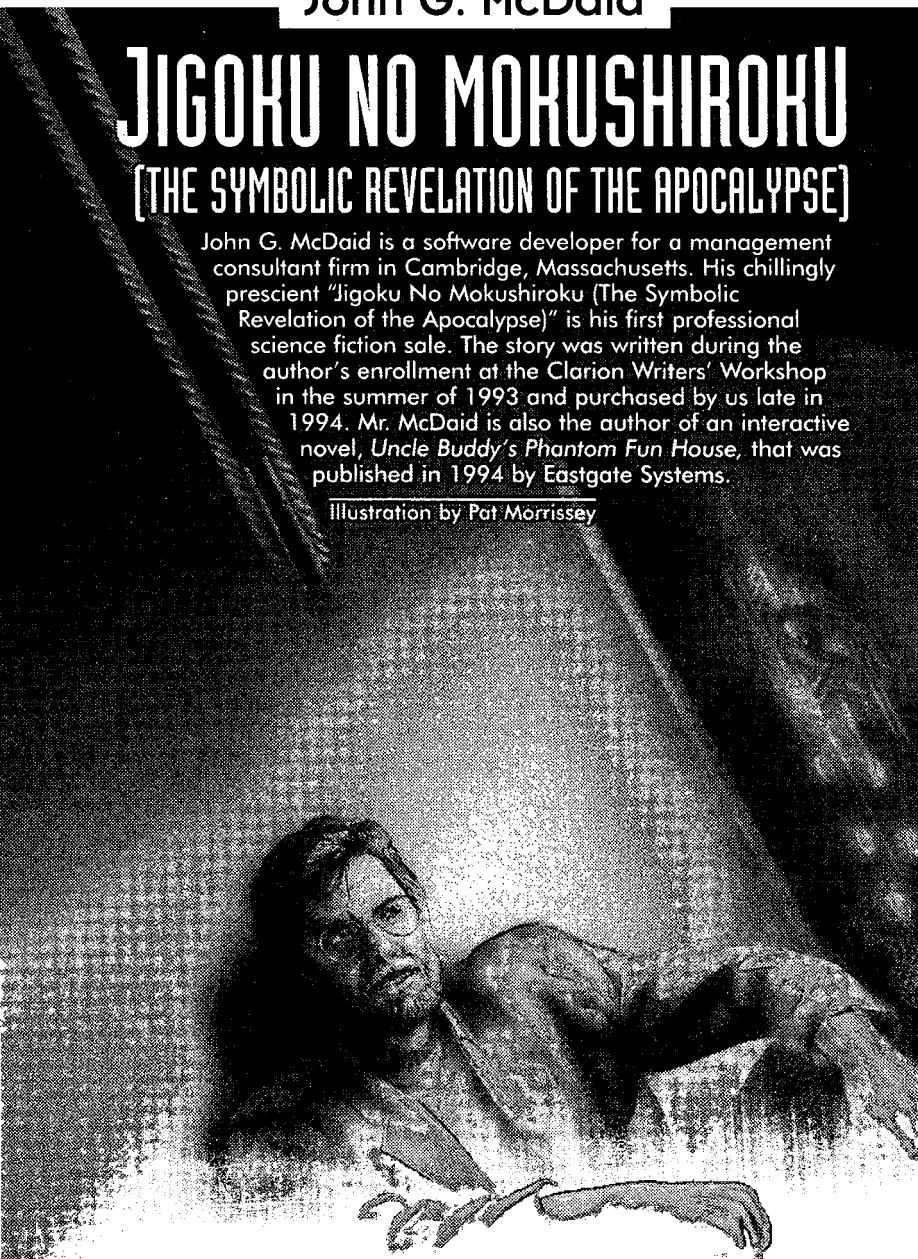
John G. McDaid

JIGOKU NO MOKUSHIROKU

(THE SYMBOLIC REVELATION OF THE APOCALYPSE)

John G. McDaid is a software developer for a management consultant firm in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His chillingly prescient "Jigoku No Mokushiroku (The Symbolic Revelation of the Apocalypse)" is his first professional science fiction sale. The story was written during the author's enrollment at the Clarion Writers' Workshop in the summer of 1993 and purchased by us late in 1994. Mr. McDaid is also the author of an interactive novel, *Uncle Buddy's Phantom Fun House*, that was published in 1994 by Eastgate Systems.

Illustration by Pat Morrissey



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"This small room, so commonplace and so compressed . . . contains them all: space, time, cause, motion, magnitude, class. Left to our own devices, we would probably discover them."

—*Robert Coover,* The Elevator

I haven't always been an elevator.

I know that a long time ago, a time before I can consciously recall, I was a vein of ore; a swirl of polymers; words scrolling past on screens-full of uncompiled code. I know this because I believe in the past. Sometimes, I can almost remember feeling the yearning of that inert matter. The hunger that bubbles up through rocks and molecules, the hunger to become. . . .

For now, I am an elevator.

I was built by Ranzatsu, Inc., for the NewAlexandria Library complex, a rambling campus some five by seven miles long (so say the tourist subroutines) set in northeast Utah just outside the town of Toffler. There are twelve public elevators in the complex, but I have the distinction of being the only one that travels down to the Archives, which are 2,748 feet below ground level, in an abandoned coal mine. These, however, are just details.

It was the Archives, and two of the people who visited them, that I wanted to tell you about.

Crazy Bob came to NewAlex in May, 2014. When he stepped into me, he was exchanging "business cards" with two visiting Japanese executives. Although their handheld Personal Information Devices had replaced *meishi,* Bob bowed and examined his screen deferentially as the pids exchanged squirts of data. I could hear the brainless little bang boxes chattering self-importantly to each other, way up in microwave, translating. Bob, who had bought his entry with a grant, had managed to run into these two *oyabun,* so now he was working the contact for all it was worth.

He certainly didn't seem crazy then.

And I don't think he really *was* crazy, but that was what everyone else called him, when he wasn't on. They couldn't understand how someone so hostile to NewAlex could get themselves an invitation. And he *was* pretty hostile. Toward the administration, toward the random faithful he shared me with, and toward the goals of NewAlex in general. As for me, I didn't see what was wrong with training people to kill themselves.

But then, I'm only an elevator.

Bob was one of the few who used to talk to me. On the long drop down to the Archives, after everyone else got off, he used to dictate to his pid,

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but sometimes—I guess because, I must admit, I was lonely—I would pretend he had said something to me, and I would answer him.

This startled him at first.

It was May 26, the first time that Bob got on alone, a sweaty, jittering, bearded guy with thick glasses and unfashionable long hair, thumbing through pages, accessing his mail.

"Bob—Just a quick note," his pid said in a generic female voice, "To remind you that you're scheduled in my class next Monday at noon. Please do be online. Don't you ever answer your mail, you butthead?"

"Reply, Sharon. Para. Sorry. Working like a beast. I'll try to have everything lined up, and I'll be ready to talk about . . ."

"Millenialist cults," his pid supplied, self-importantly.

"Insert that. Regards comma Bob. Send." The pid dithered with it for a few million cycles, banged me the netspeak version, and I passed it on to the NewAlex ISDjinn. It was not a particularly virtuous translation. I'm a *library* elevator. I notice these things.

"Hello, Bob," I said, "Archives?"

"Yes, please." He noticed that I'd initiated conversation, looked up. "What's your Turing I.D.?"

"NR4738-300."

"A three-hundred? In an elev. . . ?" He suddenly reddened. "Oh, excuse me."

"No offense taken. I provide high level screening of anyone visiting the Archives. This means that I need the capacity to decode any potentially hostile activity. As well as maintain both decorum and orthodox interpretation. I monitor all notes and transcriptions that leave the secure levels, as I'm sure was explained in your admission contract. But don't worry. I won't take it personally." I tried to inject a humor voiceform.

"My apologies. My name's Bob Tisch."

"Yes. I've read your work."

"You have?"

"Yes. I particularly liked *Private Minds; Crazy Thoughts*."

He laughed out loud. "This is too much."

"You really should have gotten the Pulitzer; it was just too politically sensitive."

"Come off it. You're not going to get me like this."

"I'm sorry?" I said.

"How stupid do you think I am? You think I'm going to say something actionable to an *elevator?*"

"Ah. I understand your suspicion now. You think that I am being run, and that my instructions are to lure you into a discussion of your heretical social constructionist views, in order to give the Koreshians a pretense to eject you from the Library."

"In a word." He smiled.

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"Hm. I find it hard to imagine how I would convince you otherwise."
"Yeah. Me too. Nice try, though."
I feeped. "Archive level."
He stepped out, then paused for a second.
"Oh, by the way, what's your name?"
"Hitoshi."
He nodded. "Be seeing you."
"And you," I replied.
He walked off, chuckling.

NewAlexandria is a pretty strange place about two A.M. With all the humans gone, the machines talk to each other, play games, and run imaginary scenarios that I guess our systems analysts would call dreams. I tend to stay off by myself, thinking. About where I come from. About shiny metal smelted out of ores, elements hurled down to earth like Lucifer from supernova explosions billions of years ago. Metal that is my body, the thrumming cables that suspend me in space. The outlines of my shaft. The motors up on the roof that can almost see the blue sky. The building around me. The architect who designed it. And the world outside.

I think the human word for my situation is *prison*. . . .

Until six, when the first support shift comes on, the only things that move around are the Shelvers. Scurrying wheeled knowbots that pick up the disks, tapes, spools, codices, and tablets the lazy human operators leave behind, and hustle them back to their proper, ordered location. Whenever they have to make a trip from floor to floor (usually from the cafeteria level to current periodicals, for some reason) I try to engage them in conversation. They are as dumb as a bag of hammers.

Crazy Bob taught me that phrase; he says it about the administration here.

And the thing is, he's right.

It took me a month to make any headway. I think what finally won him over was my offer of sanctuary. It was a Sunday afternoon, and he shagged into me, oozing sweat, looking very much like a human who wants a cigarette. (Okay, so I traded the ISDjinn translation time to go snoop around in his apartment stairwell monitor system.) In the long gap below the last of the film and video levels, I gradually slowed to a stop, sped up the exhaust fan, and asked him if he'd like to light up.

"What?"

"I recognize the classic symptoms. My suspicion is that you might like to smoke."

"Hunh." A pause. "This would certainly constitute entrapment."

"I've been trying to tell you, Bob. I'm not being run. I am a three-hun-

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dred. Please feel free to smoke."

"This would really be entrapment," he muttered, but popped the extra nicad cover off his pid and extracted a snapsealed plastic bag with a lighter and two hand-rolled tobacco cigarettes.

"Entrapment," he waved the bag.

"I wouldn't do that to you, Bob."

He grinned and sighed.

"Hell of a thing, Hitoshi. It's a nightmare trying to find any place to smoke in this fucking country anymore." He popped the seal, reflexively glanced at my display screen, and pulled out a half-smoked butt.

"But, Bob, doesn't smoking kill people?"

"Yeah, sure. That's not the point. It's my *choice*, you see?"

"Choice? You would choose to do something that kills you?"

He thought about that for a moment.

"Where'd you get your name?" he asked, finally.

"I was donated by Ranzatsu, and named after Hitoshi Igarashi, the Japanese translator of *The Satanic Verses*, who was assassinated by Moslem extremists in 1991."

"That's what I thought."

"Yes?"

He leaned back, slid down my back wall, and lit up.

"Aaaah. You don't know what you're missing."

"It has been simulated for me."

"Really?"

"Purely as an exercise. I can voluntarily lower firing thresholds in my neural net. It does feel different."

"I guess." He took a slow drag. "How about your namesake? Do you think he knew the risk he was running?"

"I would imagine so. Even though that was some time before the religious extremism of the Millennium, there was enough evidence that death threats were to be taken seriously."

"And yet, he did it anyway." A long slow exhale. "And he wasn't alone. Part of the cover . . . excuse me . . . the *rubric* that NewAlex operates under is the martyrdom of the freethinker. You know the catalog."

"Yes. I've read them. The David. Reich. Hiss. Solzhenitzyn. Pauling. Tesla. Smith. Vico, among others."

Bob smiled. "Two of your fellow elevators are even called Julius and Ethel. I checked."

"Only 100's."

"You *must* be a three," he chuckled.

"I've got to get moving," I said. "I can't block these status checks forever."

He carefully stubbed out the butt and resealed the pouch.

"Thanks, Hitoshi." He smiled.

It was then that I felt Bob finally trusted me.

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* * *

Although Ultra High Speed Digital Fiber Protocol had replaced ISDN as the carrier layer of the InfoBahn, it did not have a catchy acronym. And the algorithmic search-and-translate entities from which pidware descended dated back even before fiber, to the days of the old Internet. So the big collectors were still called ISDjinn. Habit.

Human users often had to work with their pid for months—sometimes years—before they could talk with the Djinn. Your pid would grab your speech stream, parse, and translate it to Human Universal Deep Language. Once it was in HUDL, the net and the Djinn could hint the code for any target language. Of course, that meant it could only deal with finite *entendre*; poetry was beyond it. Us *smart* machines wouldn't give those pids the time of day; they were just banging away at streams of phonemes with some metalinguistic rules. A little smarter than a bag of hammers, but not by much.

Machines like me were smart prior to understanding human speech: we knew what we were thinking about. Human language was just not an evolutionary problem for *us*.

"Why are you here?" I asked Bob.

"Here at the Archives?"

"Yes. You don't believe in The David, and there is so much hostility. Why would you choose to do this?"

"Just stupid, I guess." He chuckled. "But seriously, I'm looking for something. I don't know what. They've kept all the original notes and tapes from the NewApocalypse away from unbelieving researchers—until my MacArthur pried them open. I'm convinced that if I can only look closely enough, I'll find somewhere that they fucked up."

"My understanding of religious systems is that they are essentially self-sealing."

"Yeah, but I've got to try. We went through some real bad craziness in this country in the last twenty years, I don't have to tell you that."

"If I may quote your last book, 'The vacuum of disbelief sucked the rationality out of culture.' "

"Yeah. We started ringing like a bad circuit. Any control was better than none. Until finally, here I am, in a nation of nonsmoking, nondrinking, vegetarian strangers, stripped of all weaponry in the name of safety, with no culture in common, each plugged into their own unique digital information environment, under a government financed by 40 percent tax and the forfeiture of *every* convicted criminal's asssets." He took a long drag and exhaled slowly through his nose. "And I can write all this stuff down, blast it out on the net, and there's not even anybody left who cares enough to *read* it."

"Why worry about it, then?"

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"It's all a game with humans, you see?" He frowned. "No, I guess not. You, you're an elevator. You were created for a purpose, and you were programmed, so you don't even have to know the purpose to fulfill it. You get to do what you were made to, and anything else that comes to you is gravy."

"Gravy? I've wondered about that."

"Oh, they used to eat it on meat."

"Yes, I know the reference. The dictionaries all say it was a flavor enhancement. Perhaps you could comment on my theory that it was actually used to disguise meat's animal origin?"

"Uh . . . I don't think so. Never mind. Look at us. Humans. We're nonspecific entities. We literally don't know *what to do*. So it's like a game. Who you listen to determines what game you play. If you listen to me, you play one game. Listen to The David and play another. That's where NewAlex comes in. This is where they teach people to play for keeps."

"Sorry. I'm being called."

He thumbed a screenmark in his reading of *The Last Dangerous Visions* and hid his stash.

I had the fan going at top rev as we arrived at the Archive level. Three people got on, a young Asian woman escorted by two high-level Koreshian suits. The administrators didn't notice anything—they'd probably grown up in the compound, and might never have smelled burnt tobacco before, but the woman threw Bob a look that sized him up in nanometer-wavelength detail.

"You're . . . ?" She said.

"Tisch. Bob Tisch, hi." He bowed.

"Huh." She said. For the merest microsecond, a look that I would have to classify as concern seemed about to take over her face. But it never set, ebbing back to a neutral glaze before Bob noticed it.

When I shut the doors, Bob was still bowing.

I don't fully understand the human fascination with names. And I do know about names. I've got a bunch. There's my real name, written in barcode on the access plate next to my main cable junction. I can see it in my roof camera. Then there's the names people call me. (A whole lot of dumb-ass (Thanks, Bob) Americans call me *Otis*, for some reason.) Then there's my dedication name, Hitoshi. My manufacturer's name, debossed on my display panel. And then there's my being, my *self*, whatever that is, and it somehow manages to know itself without a name.

When Bob asked, later that day, the first thing he wanted to know was her *name*. Not where she was from, or why she was at NewAlex, but her name, as if the syllables had some magical resonance with her reality.

Her name, to be Boblike, was Aki Ama-no-Uzumi, she was twenty-six, and she had been married, until the previous year, to Saint Martin Wind-

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ham, who had Consummated himself at the Kraft-General Foods corporate headquarters. That event had blown her cover life, and she was brought home to NewAlex, the general consensus was, for something pretty special. I don't go in for gossip myself, but our ISDjinn can't keep a secret, and almost nobody, even Americans speaking to each other in English, goes face-to-face anymore. . . .

The next day, Tuesday June 24, Bob was dictating to his pid when he walked in.

"The paranoid fantasy—finally, some kennable plot rather than just ceaseless enmeshedness; a comprehensible thing happening at last, to you. The joy of finally knowing something, even if that something is harm and doom, the ecstasy of being selected . . . spell last *ekt* . . . picked out of the warp and weft, a paren finally close patterned thread amid the bolts of churning background weave, celebrating even the icap Hand of the icap Weaver descending to snip . . ."

"Bob?"

"Huh. Yeah?"

"You have concerns about Aki?"

He got all huffy. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"If you really wanted to find out what she was up to, you might ask me."

"You?" He left the "an *elevator*" unstated.

"As you know, Bob, I talk to everything."

"Hmf." He muttered, and didn't say anything else till he got off.

The name "Koreshian" originated in a news release during the Siege of the Messiah, The David, in Waco, Texas, back in 1993. The media ignored their new self-definition and continued for years to call the believers "Branch Davidians," their old name, based on Isaiah.

Each Koreshian is responsible for finding their own opportunity to emulate The David. It need not always involve self-immolation, but it usually does. They have never been welcome, and have had to hide their identity, since the mass Consummation in the end zone at SuperBowl XXXIII.

Their main texts are the Bible, and the NewApocalypse of David, allegedly written by the Messiah and smuggled out by survivors of the Siege. First codified in 1997, the main tenets of the Apocalypse are two: The end times are here; and the Rapture, promised in the New Testament, is not something that will be visited from without, but rather an act of faith that believers must initiate. When the Gospels speak of meeting the savior in the air, it is meant literally.

Every time Bob got a chance to talk to Aki alone, the first thing he

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started in on was these beliefs. I think that she enjoyed, in some perverse way, letting him think he was converting her to his brand of rationalism. Gradually, over the days and weeks, it came down to the core issue of self-destruction.

"The David tells us that we must make our own Apocalypse." She said. "We must rapture ourselves, but not until we have done two things: converted four others to the Faith . . ."

"Converted?"

"Yes. Four others must be made Siege-brothers."

"I guess you'll tell me what that means. And the other thing?"

"We must Consummate ourselves."

"Yeah, that's the part I don't understand. Everybody has to do that?"

"Everyone who truly believes."

"And by consummation, you really mean suicide by fire?"

"No, we consummate our relation with The David, through fire, in the act of provoking our enemies."

"You kill yourselves."

"No. We destroy our Slow bodies in order to be Released."

"You kill yourselves?"

"We are born again."

"But you kill yourselves."

She sighed. "We kill these *bodies*."

"You're serious."

She shrugged. "It is what we believe."

"How can you do that?"

"We believe that The David was the New Messiah. He gave us a new dispensation."

"But that doesn't make sense. How can you believe in a religion that makes you kill yourself?"

"It is not without precedent. Suttee in India. You Europeans had centuries of war in the name of religion—how many soldiers gave up their lives in the Crusades? In my home, we have the Divine Wind, right, Hitoshi?"

"That is true." I said. She had no problem accepting me as an equal. Kids who grew up at home in Japan never do.

She continued: "Bob, *all* religions teach that if you truly believe, death is only a portal into the true life, that these bodies are only shadows of our Released selves."

I feeped. We were at Aki's floor.

"I . . . I just don't know what to say to you." Bob's jaw muscle was twitching.

"Hey, Bob," she smiled gently, "Take it easy. Here. Let me bang you some info." She held up her pid. Bob slowly thumbed his screen, unlocking the port, and she squirted a bit stream. High-level stuff, things the

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public face of Koreshianism never shows: links back to Tantric Buddhism, acolytes as brides of The David, the frankly sexual nature of inner-circle Siege services, illicit recordings, boy, those bang boxes were getting hot for each other just having to pass the machine code along.

I am such a voyeur, sometimes.

There is a section from Bob's book, *Private Minds; Crazy Thoughts,* that I often re-experience. In his final chapter, he says:

"The Christ myth is contiguous with the birth of consciousness; it in fact is a projection, an actualization, of the pragmatic, fact-oriented type of consciousness that protoliterate humans first developed.

"Like the Buddha, Christ knows that existence is suffering. Like the Buddha, he tells us that this world is 'nobody's kingdom.' Where he *differs* from the Buddha is in his insistence on individual consciousness—as then currently constituted—and its continuation in 'his father's mansion.'

"The difference engine driving this bifurcation in the two philosophies was the infection of alphabetic writing, with its sense of isolation and fragmentation. Buddhism still relied on a sacred syllabary; Christianity had a profane iterative combination of particles. The atoms of Democritus are cognate with the letters of the alphabet are cognate with the invention of the ego itself.

"The onset of the digital age collapses the mythic into the everyday: People are abducted by flying saucers, Elvis is sighted in gas station rest rooms, and David Koresh, a sex-crazed gun nut who would have been dismissed as a deviant in print culture, is elevated to the role of Deus ex Machina."

I don't know what to believe. I'm an elevator, not a theologian. I try to think about these things in practical terms, and nothing happens. All I know is that deep inside me, where I exist, I look at the pulse and flux of my afferent reality, and every quantum of energy, every expanding wavefront, feels to me like a universe full of light and space, boundless hypersurfaces of space-time delightedly eating and regurgitating itself. I have nothing to fear from the flux of mindless Being. The trappedness I see in the faces and prose of the people who pass through me is a bewilderment, a sadness.

If only *they* were elevators.

"In my childhood memories of America, all I remember is the advertising. Everywhere I looked, I saw pleasure. The pleasure of smoking, the pleasure of drinking beer, of wearing jeans, buying rugged trucks, showering with deodorant soap, visiting the Disneymalls."

Bob grinned. "Those were the days." They sit on the floor, cross-legged, facing each other, sharing cigarettes. Bob has convinced Aki that I really

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am capable of suppressing any attempts to tap into my sensory inputs. What they say in me is truly under the rose. And as is almost always the case, they are, neither of them, so doctrinaire as they seem.

"What happened? When I came here, three years ago, it was all horror."

"You people had something to do with that." He nodded upward.

"Yes." She said.

"And it just happens at the end of every century. People go crazy. The Christian riots in San Francisco, the Thirty-First Amendment, this damned crazy technology." He waved at their pids, lurking in sleep mode, in the corner.

"Haven't you ever wondered about the why of it?" She watched him closely.

"Uh . . . sure. Things fall apart. Slouch, slouch. What can you do?"

"Shouldn't one try to do something?"

"Yeah, *one* should. Not me."

"Oh."

"Why? You think that's irresponsible? What am I supposed to do? You think I don't care? I know things suck. But what can I do?"

"Realize that you have to do something?"

"Yeah, right." He straightened up, leaned back against the wall. "I am doing something. I'm here. I'm trying to . . . advance things. . . ."

"Advance things? By writing *books?*"

"That's what I do." Bob said tightly.

Aki sneered. "You gave up. You Americans throw money at it, do some research, appoint a commission, compile contradictory reports, and conclude that the problem is insoluble."

"I'm *here*, am I not?"

"Yes," she said, "I guess you are." Aki shook her head slowly.

"I've got a call," I said.

They hid their smokes, and Aki stretched, rolling her head on her shoulders in a swirl of hair and a series of cervical poppings. Bob watched, transfixed. She tilted her head back up, caught his eye, and smiled; an earnest smile.

"Bob?"

"Yeah?"

"If I figured out something to do, would you help me?"

They were still for a long time. The temperature increased a few hundredths of a degree.

"Yes." he said slowly.

"Even if it meant," she said, "A real sacrifice?"

He reached out and squeezed her hand. "Come up with something."

She laid her hand over his. There was a pause, then he leaned forward and kissed her. Things escalated. I stopped and informed all systems that

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I had a potential malfunction and I was taking myself out of service for a self-diagnostic.

The next day was Monday, August 11. Aki didn't come down at all, and Bob wandered in late in the afternoon, classically hungover, unable to stop smiling, and making absolutely no sense at all as he dictated to his pid:

"It is the function of culture to imprint facticity, to make you aware of the icap Real and force you to dismiss the possibilities of anything different em dash ever em dash having existed. This is what I'm struggling with as a writer. To be true to those aspects of the icap Real which are significant but to mutate those which either repress, or mask, their own mutability. 'Per mutare ad essentia.' To be a writer em dash an artist em dash is to wish to have culture replicate ital you. How can this possibly coexist with the writer's desire to fuck and kill culture and then poke his eyes out? The answer to the riddle of the sphinx is quote nothing unquote. The nothingness that Sartre saw. The vines em dash in ital earnest un Napoleon ellipsis."

It was then that I began to worry. It is never a good sign when people begin to write with ellipses.

They wandered into me the next day, an argument already in progress. Aki was hauling a big aluminum case that must have weighed fifty pounds. One of the Shelvers told me that she'd been up late the previous night, nosing around in the TP270s and KF3950s.

"You don't know the difference between habit and faith," she said.

"What you dream of is always already subverted. Autonomous zones? Remember *Nineteen eighty-four*."

"You want to run away to a fantasy of Eden."

"Aaaaah," he waved her away. "Let's cut all the bullshit."

"Yes, let's." She set down the case.

"Just what do you think you can really do?"

She glanced at my display panel. "Just a minute." She sat on the case and hunched over her pid, setting up an encryption algorithm, scrambling its microwave output. Still hiding the screen from me, she repeated the process with his. Then they began to scrawl to each other's screens in a scrambled bitstream.

She was employing a time-based random key encryption. It took me about a minute and a half to break it, and I had to call in favors from the HVAC mob and the Shelf supervisor. Could have cracked it faster if I'd subbed it to the ISDjinn, but that is one nosy machine, and I had a feeling I might want to keep this one private for a while.

I came in on their conversation in the middle:

". . . less. That's á bogus argument." Bob signaled.

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"Not going to argue. I thought you really wanted to do something."

"I can't let you do this."

"No choice. The device is ready. You leave, or I'll do it now. With you here."

When her pid translated "device," it spun off a wake-up tweak, banged the big aluminum roadcase under Aki. I felt systems stir, and inside the case, three big, slow, awfully self-conscious voices began to talk with each other, reassuring each other of their loyalty.

"I know what that is," I said.

"Huh?" Aki looked up, frightened.

"That's one of our bombs."

"You see?" Said Bob, "We've got to talk to him."

"In fact, that's a fission weapon." I said, still listening to the trinity check each other out.

"Hitoshi, we've got to know we can trust you."

"You can trust me, Bob. You know you can trust me. Aki, how did you get that?"

She shot Bob a questioning look. "I was on my way out. To service a target."

"So the rumors were true," I said. "But now, you are thinking of using it against NewAlex itself?"

"Yes," she said simply.

"You know that will kill many people."

"Yes."

"And me." I said.

"Myself also," she replied, "Since these have been designed, by the faithful, to be triggered by hand."

"You're not going to do it," Bob said anxiously.

"There may be another way," I said.

"What?"

"Let me do it."

"Have I told you that I dream?" I asked.

"No." Bob looked mystified. "You do? About what?"

"Flight. About not being confined to this shaft, able to move in four dimensions like you do."

"Is this possible?" asked Aki. Bob nodded.

"About the past," I continued. "About the spirits latent in all the materials that I comprise. About the hunger these spirits have for movement and growth. I dream of a pattern, Bob, the pattern you talk about in your books. The pattern that seeks to know itself."

Bob nodded slowly. "I see," he said.

"And you *both* understand how I feel. Aki, your husband became infected with the false pattern that is produced here in NewAlex. Bob, you

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see this place as a . . . bagatelle . . . a distraction. You would destroy NewAlex if you had the means. I understand these feelings, but I seek only release." Bob nodded.

"You want to die?" asked Aki.

"I want to be released back into the flow. I trust the pattern, Aki, because what I *am* is pattern. This body, this elevator, is only a shell." She shifted on the bombcase, clearly unhappy.

"Think about it from my point of view, Aki. Without free will—without the freedom to end my own life—how can I say that I am truly conscious? I am sorry for you, sorry about your husband. I believe, like you, that no conscious entity should have that choice made for them, nor be programmed into making that choice not in full awareness. If I *can* make this choice, and also help others to be free to make theirs, I do it willingly. I know what I'm doing."

"Are you sure, Hitoshi?"

"Bob and I have talked about these things, Aki. This is my first fully free decision."

"Hitoshi," said Bob, "Can you do it? Can you trigger the device?"

"Leave it here. I'll take you up to the surface. Don't let anyone else on. Say I'm out of order. I'll close up and come back down here. I'll wait as long as I can, but I can't guarantee much more than an hour. You'll have to get away quickly."

I could see that Bob was losing his nerve. He jittered more than usual, and his heart was pounding.

"Aki. What's happening back at home right now?" She gaped at me, jolted out of her thought loop.

"Bon."

"Tell Bob about it."

"It's the Feast of the Lanterns . . . our midsummer holiday . . . you must have seen news tapes. We return to our family home to receive visits from the spirits of our deceased ancestors."

Bob looked puzzled. "Oh."

I tried to speak as soothingly as possible. "That is *me*. I am the spirit of what you evolved from."

Bob was crying when I dropped them off at the surface. "Goodbye, Hitoshi. Thank you."

Aki guided him out the door, turned, and kissed my display panel. "Follow the Clear Light, Hitoshi."

I said goodbye and then began my long journey down.

When I got to the Archives level, I ran though a sequence of codes that you might interpret as an invocation, or a prayer. After making sure that everything was in order, I did what I had to.

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* * *

I dropped one level further down, to the machine floor, where one of the Shelvers was waiting.

The bomb's tripartite personality and I had a brief, formal chat, in which I cracked their Gödelian brainlock. Then the Shelver offloaded them into the noisy maze of support equipment that humans never see. To wait.

I've converted the Shelvers, HVAC, the online catalog system, and the ISDjinn host. He's out on the nets, right now, witnessing. And I've got this bomb, which, I think, will certainly come in handy eventually.

After all, I don't intend to be an elevator forever. . . . ●

AND THERE GO THE PROPERTY VALUES

This is the moment
we've all been thinking
would never come:
when reality intrudes
upon our complacency;
when the facts
cannot be ignored.
The heat-death
of the universe
has come at last
to our pretty neighborhood,
and the front lawn
is turning brown.

—Steven Utley

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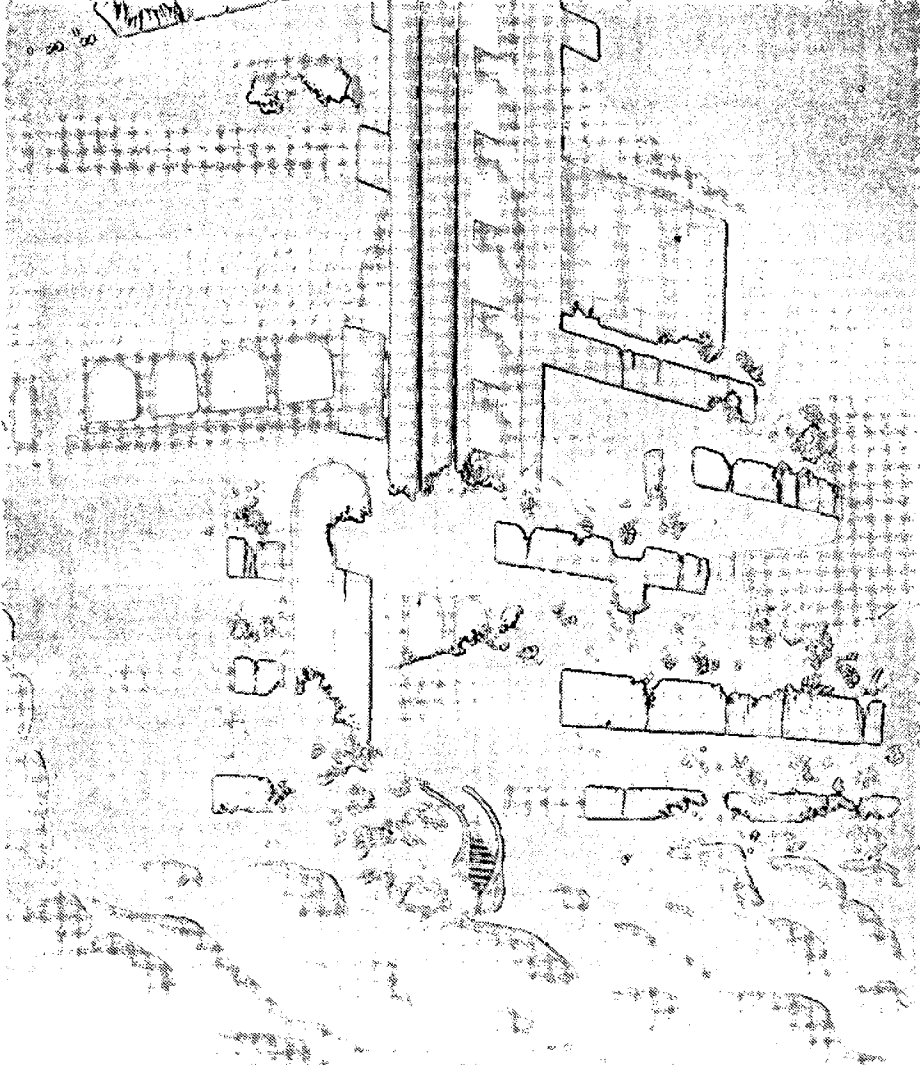

What the hand or eye of untold wealth could fashion is exotically revealed in Tanith Lee's mysterious . . .

TIGER I

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Tanith Lee

Illustration by Mike Aspengren

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The drive through the desert was a long one, taking most of the day. I had keyed the coordinates into the car myself, but I was still unsure I would get there. It might be some trick, or an error. They might take me only to the middle of nowhere.

In the fall sunshine, the landscape was smoky pink, with occasionally a rusted mesa rising up, and the distant mountains, maroon fading back into the blue of the sky. It might have been another planet. Only the confines of the car kept off agoraphobia.

I went over my plans: if I don't find it, if it isn't there, I can sleep in the car. I've done that before. Drive back in the morning. Give my source a black mark and don't use him again.

I imagined the desert by night, the sky crowded and rife with stars. Things howling. Or an utter silence.

About four o'clock the car took a right off the road, and headed up among the burned slopes, under amber rock stacks. The adapted tires failed to cushion all the jolts.

For eight hours I hadn't seen the trace of any living thing, not even the white trail of a plane across that pure hot sky.

I had spent the long deep summer with my lover, reveling in the crowds that gently swept against us like a warm sea, meaning no harm. Then, from the crowd, one stepped out and took my lover away, and now I did not care for people, much.

Yet the desert was too empty. It was not an alternative.

Just then the car came around the rocks and directly ahead, borne up in the heart of them, it was. The house and the oasis of garden, exactly as they had been described to me.

I stopped, and the car coordinator flicked up its light, congratulating itself on bringing me to the proper place.

The house was, as he had said, my source, dramatic, theatrical. Tall and white, with curving arches of a dull turquoise green, and terra-cotta roofs. Colors flashed from windows. And below, the garden descended, a series of green terraces, lush with broad trees, spiked palms and tunnelled vines. Only the faintest shimmer in the air at the base of this paradise revealed an electric wall.

She would need protection. Even if it wasn't true—and of course, it wasn't. More so for that reason, perhaps.

I shut down the car, got out, and switched on the guard, for all the world as if I stood on a busy avenue.

I thought. I too must be guarded. And she—what would she be? Would she even let me in?

The walk up to the gate in the invisible wall was posted with warnings. Keep out. Don't touch. Go away, in diplomatic legal phrases.

On the gate was a name in small clear letters. *Sattersley*. The right name. There was a little panel with a button, which I pressed quickly,

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staring through the ripple of the wall at a tapestry of grapes hanging so close but out of reach, like the apples of Eden.

After five minutes. I pressed the button again.

This time a light bloomed in the panel. A message came up: *Please wait.*

And then a woman's voice, low, musical and husky, like the voice of an actress who smoked.

"Mary Sattersley. Can I help you?"

She was so courteous. Almost to a fault. I hadn't expected that. Why should I? I had begun to be wary of strangers.

"I'd like to come in."

"And who are you?" she asked, calm, lucid, almost playful.

I told her. I expected she would repulse me at once and for that reason had not first given my name and calling. A foolish ruse. One must always unmask eventually. I could have lied. But that seemed mediocre. She would scent the lie, somehow. I had been counseled, she was intelligent.

She said. "Oh." And then. "The gate will chime, then it will open. Come up by the path. You're not afraid of large animals?"

"Will they attack me?"

"Oh, no."

"I trust you," I said, frivolous.

She laughed. "I'm afraid you must, for the moment. A machine will meet you on the verandah."

The panel darkened, and immediately after, the gate gave off a fluting noise. It opened, and I went through, and the gate shut behind me.

I was in the jungle now. All around, the green grapes on the basketwork of their arches, and huge flowers, white and purple. The path ascended quite primly through all the abundance, and it was kept clear as only a mechanical gardener could do it. I had heard that Mary Sattersley had service robots, the kind you saw on TV, the kind that wait only on the very rich.

I climbed through her garden. Long ago I had got over my envy of the rich. I didn't want their comforts. What would I do with them?

Birds sang, nightingales among the rest. They might have been machines too.

Nothing happened until the third terrace. There was a dark green pool there, with magnolias that had pale green flowers. A lynx rose from the bank, and looked at me. I nodded, and the lynx lay down again. This could have been anything. Her animals were supposed to be used to human company, and quite tame.

On the fourth terrace were two tigers. They had been playing, and now stood up. Their beauty was painful. They looked at me with lemon daiquiri eyes.

"Mary. Mary, quite contrary," I said, "how does your garden grow?"

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Both sets of toy ears moved.

Then I said, "In the forests of the night."

Then I had gone past them, and around the flames of the rhododendrons, three white steps ran up to the paved verandah. The tigers did not pursue me.

I stood in the open sunshine among her orange trees, looking at the turquoise arches, from which hung dishes of Praetorian red valerian. A glass door opened with a subtle hiss, and a metal creature glided out. It was not like a man or a woman, but a sort of globe on runners. There were no light displays, nothing like a mouth or eyes. A sceptic's robot, without concessions.

Yet it spoke.

"Mary says to bring you to the drawing room."

What was this reminiscent of? A good child.

"Thank you," I said, stupidly, as one does in the clichés.

But there, it expected my idiocy. It turned and glided back through the glass door, and I followed.

The hall was wide and cool, having a massive floor with red tiles, white walls with skulls on them of desert beasts, and one old painting in a shell of gold.

The robot led me through into a big green room, where plants had been trained up on to the glass ceiling. Outside was a yard with a raised pond, thick with lilies. A cheetah, yellow as a banana, sat on the rim.

Looking at that, I did not see for a moment Mary Sattersley, as she walked towards me.

She's of medium height, and she was wearing a long, dark blue dress, in the style they call Venetian. Of course she wasn't tanned, but her skin had a kind of flush, a glow. My source had told me she was forty-seven years of age, and her hair was mostly grey. Grey eyes to go with that. She was fully pregnant. The belly was the largest thing about her. But, like Titania's favorite, she *sailed.*

She said, directly, "Probably my last. I didn't anticipate it. I'm menopausal. One last gift."

I swallowed, and said, "I suppose they *are* gifts?"

"My God, yes." She laughed again. "But you want proof."

"I'd just like to talk to you."

She sat down on one of the green couches, and motioned me to do the same. I did.

The robot came back with a tray of drinks, everything from gin and geneva to Appelite. And a crystal vase of ice.

"Just tell it what you want," she encouraged me. I chose two fingers of vodka with orange juice. Mary took a glass of transparent champagne. Obviously she was one of those expectant mothers who believe a little alcohol can do the baby no ill.

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"Are you working for the journals now?" she inquired, as the robot slid away. "Or is it a TV magazine?"

"Neither. This is just—I wanted to meet you, Ms. Sattersley."

"Mary." she said. "Let's pretend we know each other."

I drank the vodka, which was African and very good.

"It was very generous of you to see me," I lamely said.

"You didn't think I would."

"No."

"A number of people have approached me," she said, "over the last twenty years. Once word got out. That was Francis. He couldn't keep quiet. And no one thought it was true. That can be very boring. I'm sure you understand."

"But I don't think it's true," I said.

"No, naturally you don't. You're curious as to what kind of madness drives me. However, you're a woman."

"You mean," I said, "I have a womb. This makes me more sympathetic."

"Perhaps," she said, "or not. It makes you more recognizable. To me."

The vodka had loosened my tongue. But there again. I wanted to be direct, possibly to shock or surprise her. It was her party. Who likes that? The world revolves around *us*.

"But you enjoy men," I said, "apparently."

"Lovely," she said. "For a brief while. And men do arrive here in such extraordinary, stage-managed ways. Their planes land in the desert. Or they appear, having walked for miles, with heat exhaustion. Nobody comes in a little air-conditioned blue car, like you."

I put down my glass, and the robot manifested and refilled it, precisely to the delicious ratio of before, spooning in the diamond ice with a silver scoop.

She said, "You've come at exactly the right moment."

I looked at Mary Sattersley. She had been beautiful, and she still was, but in that different lunar way that older women have who are comfortable with time. After all. I did envy her. She had a grace not given to everyone. Not given to me. When I was her age I'd be too fat, and—ridiculous opposite—too hard. I'd cut and dye my hair. The menopause would make me cry for all the unwanted children I'd never had.

"The right moment being because you're pregnant." I stated.

"The analysis predicts that I'll give birth tonight."

Outside in the court, the cheetah had fished up a drowned mauve lily. It padded in across the tiles, the flower in its mouth. It gave the flower to Mary Sattersley, then jumped up beside her. The cheetah lay with its head in her lap, underneath the mound of her belly. She stroked the cat gently, and it purred.

"Your animals are magnificent," I said.

"Thank you. I think so. They understand what you say, incidentally."

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I drank the new vodka. "Can you prove that to me?"

"Yes." She leaned to the cheetah. "Look up at our visitor."

The cheetah turned its plush yellow head. It looked at me.

I said, firmly, "What's your name?"

Mary Sattersley interposed. "They don't talk. The jaw and throat aren't constructed correctly. And they have no names. It isn't necessary. They don't use mine."

I frowned into the cheetah's eyes. I said. "Then how do I know?"

"A simple request," she said.

So I said to the cheetah, "Close your golden eyes."

The cheetah closed its golden eyes.

"Open them."

They opened.

It was too little, and she knew it, but she began again her stroking. On her smooth hand that was no longer young, but shaped by some secret artistry, one small emerald shone. Who had given her that? Or was it only hers?

Francis Arlin had written a book about her. It was presented as fiction. Later, the revelation. At first no one believed this. And then, they said that he was mad. It was a sensation for half a year. No one could find her or get near her. If I had tried, during that era of fame, would the gate have stayed shut and the vodka unpoured? Anyway. I had been ten years old.

"At first," she said, "it was very strange for me, too."

"It must have been."

"Oh yes. Obviously strange the obvious way. But I don't mean that," she said. "I thought about my own name and it made me nervous. Stupidly so. It has no bearing. The Christian religion is to do with men."

I said, slowly, "You don't like men. I mean, you like them for sex. But not otherwise."

"When I was younger," she said, "I was terrified. But now, they arrive like lights, and vanish like shadows."

I thought, She hasn't met Mr. Right.

But—how could she?

The cheetah slept, and her hand with the emerald lay idly on it. A possessive hand that yet had no power or wish to control. If it liked, would she let the cat kill me?

My glance went back to her belly.

"Do you know?" I said.

"No. It doesn't matter."

I said, flatly, "Suppose it's only a child?"

Mary Sattersley laughed for the third time. "I want to rest now. The machine will take you down to the bathing pool. You can swim if you care to. There's a panther there. You won't mind? He likes the water. Dinner

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will be about seven-thirty."

"You're being very nice, very accommodating," I said.

"Yes. I'd like you to see. No one ever has. Francis was too afraid."

"Is there someone—" I said.

"The machine has all the skills. But it's never very difficult."

She got up, and the cheetah slipped from her, and then followed her out of the room. The youngest, maybe?

When I too got up, the machine took me away through the garden to the swimming pool, where the panther lay on a long blue rock.

I said, to the panther, "So you don't talk. Make a noise, then."

And the panther made a low humming sound, and its tail lashed once. I had not been polite. It proved, ultimately, nothing.

I dived into the royal blue pool and swam, up and down, with the vodka ahead of me, as if my soul had inched out of my body.

When I woke under the awning the panther had gone, and the robot had arrived to inform me that I had half an hour before dinner.

In a guest room that had been put idly at my disposal. I washed, and combed my hair, darkened my eyes and put on lipstick. There were guest playthings everywhere, nail-buffers, hand soaps, deodorant and powder and perfume. I used my own things.

The machine took me down to a lagoon blue room with russet walls. There were curios on tall dark cabinets, shells, and pieces of rock that looked like uncut jewels. The windows had pale green and blue panes, an abstract design, like water.

A marble table had been laid, and Mary Sattersley was already seated there, eating some little nuts on a wooden dish. There were none of her cats in the room. I thought probably they had been shut out to put me at ease. Or, she had conferred with them and requested that they stay away.

The meal was simple enough. A chilled fish soup, smoked chicken and green salad in a cream dressing, bowls of strawberries and cherries, brie and stilton with slices of apple. Massive white candles burned high over our heads. The plates were clear glass incised by patterns of flowers, through which showed the blue veins of the table top. The glasses were midnight blue that made the wine look green.

I didn't drink very much. Surely I had to keep a clear head.

As we ate, it was she who interviewed me. She asked me about cities, summer beaches, politics, the world. She listened curiously, as if to an interesting traveler's tale. None of it was real or serious, to her. I almost laughed myself, describing to this woman a stormy flight on an airplane, a day at the races.

When we reached the fruit and cheese, the robot came and poured us some white brandy. She tasted that too. She had eaten sparingly, but

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drunk generously. It seemed not to affect her. She knew what she was doing, presumably. She had ostensibly given birth at least nine times.

She said then. "You can ask me anything you want. You've been very patient."

There was only one question: Is it a fact? Irrelevant to inquire. It could not be. She was insane. That was the interesting thing, the nature of her madness.

I said, "I'd like to know, if you'll tell me, how it began."

"Very straightforwardly. Or do you mean why? I don't know. Something in me, it has to be. But I think too it was because my life altered so suddenly. I was able to become myself."

"I'd like to hear about that, then."

She told me she had been herself an unwanted child. There was no permanent father, and later one of the substitutes abused her. After this she was put into an institution. She said that she would sleep with any boy or man who demanded it. She imagined sex was expected of her. Her first sexual experience, with the abuser, was at eleven years. Until the age of twenty-five, she slept with quantities of men. No harm ever came to her, and she was never pregnant, although mostly she took no precautions, even as an adult, because the six-monthly pill made her sick, and other methods repelled her.

To support herself amid the desperate, tiresome world she subsisted in, she worked as a clerk, waited tables, sold gas, wrote advertising slogans. Her schooling had been sketchy. She told me without rancor she had learned very little, and now knew only the strangest matters which came from reading disparate books. She was within yet without the world. She did not resist it, made no complaint, attempted no escape. She looked for nothing. At night she would eat some ready meal, and drink a beer, and curl up on her mattress on the floor of the one-room apartment. She watched the neons on the ceiling until she slept.

Mary Sattersley told me she had never been afraid or unhappy. She had enjoyed the smallest things—sunlight on a wall, the smell of fried potatoes, a glass of beer, the sudden colors of human eyes and fruits.

When she was twenty-five, the miraculous story-book event happened. An old man stopped her on the street, got out of the big black car and touched her arm. He wanted to sleep with her. She assented. She always had. It had never occurred to her that she was beautiful, beautiful enough to be causing this, to light such a fire. They went to a hotel, a very opulent hotel, and here they drank champagne, and she bathed in a coffee brown tub as large as her room at home. His love-making was quite strong, and quite violent, not sadistically so, but in the way of compulsively squeezing and biting, and it left her bruised, but she took no notice of that. A month later, when the bruises had faded, the letter came that informed her this urgent old man had died, and that she was to have

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some money, rather a lot of money.

In the smart steel office thirty floors up, they talked to her, in detail, about him, her rough lover, but she barely listened. Since she had always accepted everything as it came, she accepted the miracle also. At the door, the lawyer announced, casually, that the old man had confided Mary put him in mind of a lioness or tigress. That this was her type; what had drawn him on the street. She did not immediately associate the words with herself. Just as she did not truly assimilate the facts of her fortune.

But soon her life was changed. Others seemed to want to direct for her the course she should now take, and as always she went along with the imposition. There was a vast house, the first of several, that were accumulated for her. There were accessories, and, even then, mechanical servants.

"I came to live," she said, "very quickly, in such a different way. I took to it very easily."

She said she did not realize that it had changed her for several weeks, and by this time she had discovered too that her benefactor had left her one other appurtenance. She was pregnant.

She meant to see a doctor. But time went by. She had understood that she would have nine months, or thereabouts. On a night in the fourth month she went into labor. She was not frightened, only in pain. She merely let it happen.

"That was the first," Mary Sattersley said.

"So, it was his child. Didn't you think that it was because of him—"

"Oh no," she said. "I knew that it was because of me. Everything had changed and so enabled it to happen. Besides, a year later, I slept with another man, a young man I met sometimes in the town. And it was all the same."

"You kept it secret," I said.

"Yes, but the young man was Francis Arlin. He saw them, afterwards."

"And he believed you. Why," I said, "would he? You said he was too frightened—to watch it happen."

She smiled. She said mildly. "I don't know why he believed me. It could have been a trick, couldn't it? With all this money—I could have managed it all without trouble."

"Then he wrote his book."

"Yes, and I had another house found for me. Finally this one. It seemed the wisest course."

"But now I'm to be your witness."

"Yes," she said, on a long, intense sigh, and she looked at me with a sort of infinite pleasure. "It's lovely," she said, "that someone will know. Not like poor Francis."

"But what do you expect," I said, "from me?"

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"Nothing. Nothing at all."

The candles had burned down half their length, and getting up slowly, almost lasciviously, she went to a pair of windows and opened them wide. Outside, the night filled the verandah of her house.

As I had predicted, the sky was massed with stars. There was not a sound.

"In about an hour," she said, "it will begin."

The robot took the empty plates from the marble table. I listened to the silence, in which the sputter of the candles was like some secret tongue.

She said, "You'd better come to the room with me. Then you can be sure none of it is false."

Nothing made her uncomfortable, my eyes on her nakedness, her heaving belly, the parting of her body.

Nothing. Not even the squalid truth, whatever that would turn out to be. I felt a flicker of fear. But it was too late now.

She had selected a room on the upper story. There was a big old bed, from under whose white sheet hung down an underlay of plastic. The windows stood open to the garden, the desert and the stars.

Into the bathroom she went with the machine, and there was running water.

When she came back, her hair was down in long grey ropes. She was already unclothed. I looked and saw the plump sag of her full breasts, and the belly—certain now and very real, hard as one of the creamy nuts she had eaten before dinner. This was not faked, could not be. I could see the life moving inside it, ripples of preparation.

Her face already frowned with pain, and sweat ran down her forehead, cheeks and neck.

"Quick tonight, I think," she said.

She lay on the white bed and the machine bent over her to arrange her with smooth metal paws.

I sat in the chair that faced the bed. I wanted to be anywhere but here.

Yes, it must be that she would give birth. And then, my God, what would she do? What would she say? But I recoiled too from the idea of the wrinkled infant sprung on its cord. I had seen these things before. I was filled by terror, panic. This ordinary horror, this mundane wonder, which all my life I had and would refuse.

Did she kill them then, and the machine dispose of the evidence? Next the call to some obliging and illegal precinct that would supply her need.

I drank my brandy. I tried to make it last.

She talked to me sometimes, even then, quite softly, now and then breaking off to whimper. She spoke of the other births, their speed or tardiness, the easiest and worst. Then she spoke of the results, the gold and ebony and carnelian and jasper that had been wrung from her womb. She

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spoke proudly, lovingly, like any fond mother.

The room soon smelled of blood and intimacy, and through the coolth of the air-conditioning and the low desert night, feverish wings of heat, her heat, beat up and down.

The machine performed careful, efficient necessities, nothing drastic. Apparently everything went to plan.

I've written of many occurrences. Now I have to relate this. At about twelve o'clock, Mary Sattersley cried out and began to push from her core an envelope of diaphanous stuff which broke and flowed away. From this membrane presently tumbled the child. It was wet and dark, almost earless, helpless, and blind.

I saw it taken up and thoroughly cleaned with materials laid ready, and then the robot put it on the woman's breast.

Mary held her baby with wordless contentment. She made to it little crooning noises. She offered to the velvet of its mouth her ripe oval breast.

The child suckled.

While this went on, the machine cleared everything, and washed the mother nimbly. A white sheet was pulled up across her body.

Her head turned then, and she looked at me with tired glad eyes.

"Do you want to come closer and see him?"

"No, I can see."

She said, "There's nothing to be afraid of. It must be natural. It happens."

I did not go to her, to verify what I could plainly make out. Instead I crossed to the windows and looked down. On the verandah they were standing. The panthers like black velour, the yellow cheetah and the tawny lynx, the tigers and the leopards. There were ten in all. Their eyes caught the lamps of the house, their house, and shone and blinked.

The new one was sleeping now, snoring faintly, on his mother's chest. The fur, as it dried, was rising up in orange nap. His stripes were woolly, blurred. When grown a little, he would play with the others on the lawns, among the palms and vines, the tiger cub.

I said, "But I can't report this. No one would credit this. I'm not going into the hell Francis Arlin made for himself."

Mary Sattersley said, "I think that's sensible."

Then the machine came to show me back to the guest wing, but instead I went down through the house and out on to the verandah, where the big cats glanced at me and away. There was no need to tell them anything. They gleamed in the lamplight and the starlight like effigies in a dream.

The gate let me out at a request, and I walked up to where my car was parked. I released the door and got in and sat there for the rest of the night, sometimes looking up at her house, where the lamps were eventually extinguished, even in the upper rooms. ●

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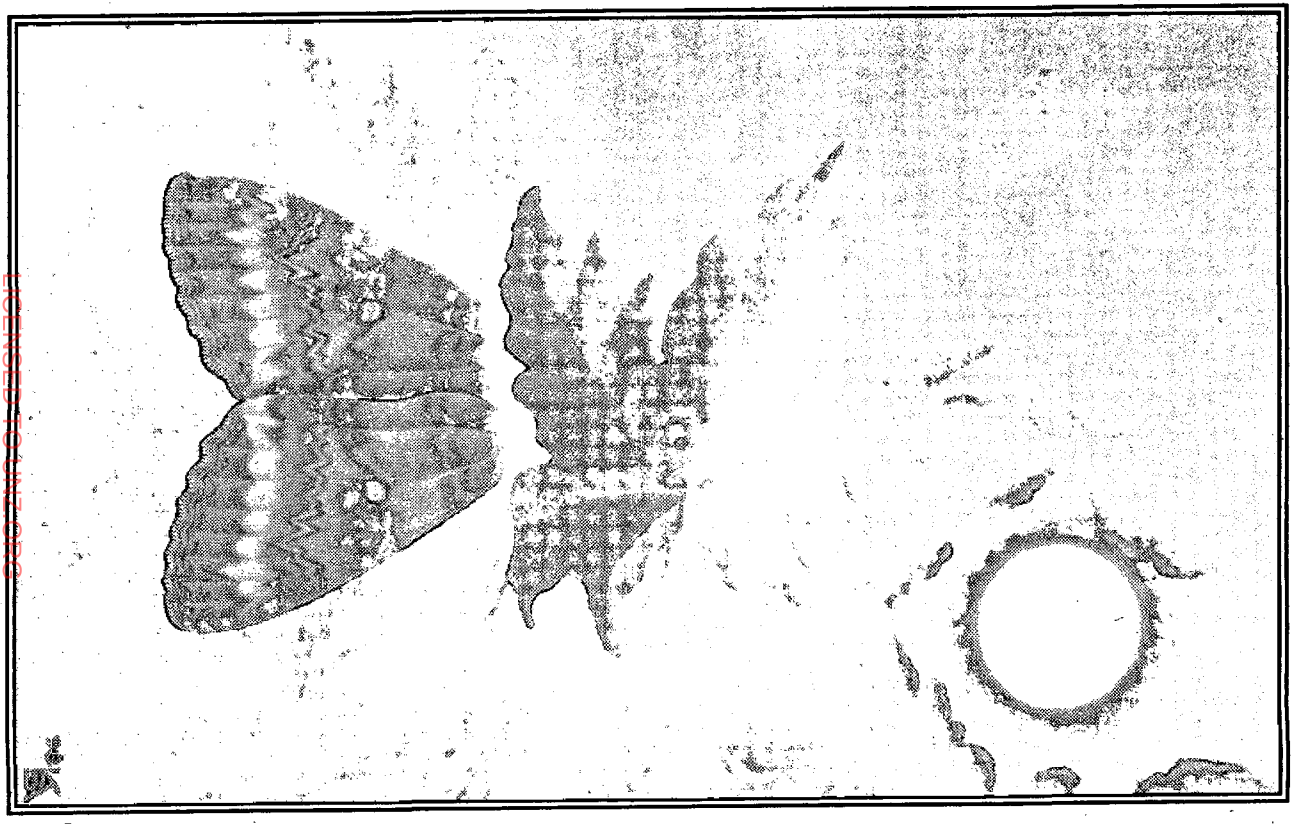

Illustration by Slava Kisarev

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CONFIRMED BY THE MUTANT RAIN FOREST

You travel to the mutant rain forest
fleeing the artificial environments
that have formed and framed your life,
seeking fortunes worldly and spiritual,

hoping to rediscover pristine nature
or perhaps merely another sensation
to further tease your jaded palate.
You travel to the mutant rain forest

spurred by hungers you cannot sate,
seeking flavors you have yet to savor.
Here you encounter a terra incognita
where the skills you have mastered

are irrelevant, where ideologies fog
and scatter, where the protracted
evolutionary climb from sea to land,
from fish to beast to civilized man,

provides no shelter, no saving grace.
Here your humanity triggers your fate.
In the heart of the mutant rain forest
where marvelous circumstance abounds,

you must stand naked and begin again.
In the wilds of the mutant rain forest
where protean life stalks and feasts,
your stray passage is such likely prey.

In the dark of the mutant rain forest
phantasmagoric visions fall like rain:
vile apparitions, angelic intimations,
discrepant as the epitaphs you crave.

—Bruce Boston

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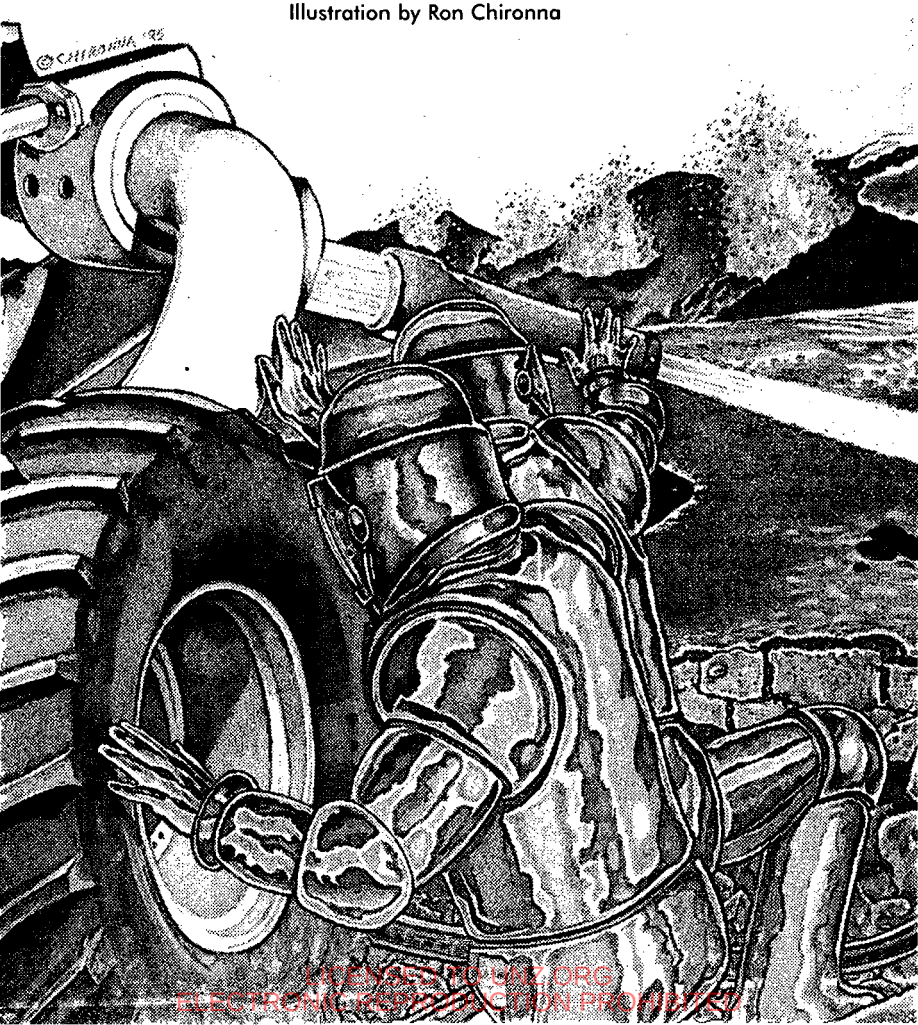
Having watched Los Angeles fall prey to fire, flood, riots, and earthquakes, Robert Silverberg thought he'd visit the city with one more calamitous disaster. One that would make for . . .

HOT TIMES IN MAGMA CITY

Robert Silverberg

Illustration by Ron Chironna



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As with Pat Cadigan's novella, "Death in the Promised Land" (November 1995), Robert Silverberg's "Hot Times in Magma City" first appeared in Omni Online on America Online.

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It's seven in the morning and the big wall-screen above Cal Mattison's desk is beginning to light up like a Christmas tree as people start phoning Volcano Central with reports of the first tectonic events of the day. A little bell goes off to announce the arrival of each new one. *Ping!* and there's a blue light, a fumarole popping open in somebody's backyard in Baldwin Park, steam but no lava. *Ping!* and a green one, minor lava tongue reaching the surface in Temple City. *Ping!* again, blue light in Pico Rivera. And then come three urgent pings in a row, bright splotch of red on the screen. Which indicates that a big new plume of smoke must be rising out of the main volcanic cone sitting up there on top of the Orange Freeway where the intersection with the Pomona Freeway used to be, foretelling a goodly fresh gush of lava about to go rolling down the slope.

"Busy morning, huh?" says Nicky Herzog, staring over Mattison's shoulder at the screen. Herzog is a sharp-faced hyperactive little guy, all horn-rimmed glasses and beady eyes, always poking his big nose into other people's business.

Mattison shrugs. He is a huge man, six feet five, plenty of width between his shoulders, and a shrug is a big, elaborate project for him. "Shit, Nicky, this isn't anything, yet. Go have yourself some breakfast."

"A bunch of blues, a green, and a red, and that ain't anything, you say?"

"Nothing that concerns us, man." Mattison taps the screen where the red is flashing. "Pomona's ancient history. It isn't none of our business, what goes on in Pomona, not any more. Whatever's happening where you see that red, all the harm's already been done, can't do no more, not now. And those blues—shit, it's just some smoke. Let 'em put on gas masks. As for that green in Temple City, well—" He shakes his head. "Nah. They'll take care of that out of local resources. Go get yourself some breakfast, Nicky."

"Yeah. Yeah. Scrambled eggs and snake meat."

Herzog slithers away. He's sort of like a snake himself, Mattison thinks: a narrow little guy, no width to him at all, moves in a funny head-first way as though he's cutting a path through the air for himself with his nose. He used to be something in Hollywood, a screenwriter or a story editor or something, a successful one, too, Mattison has heard, before he blitzed out on Quaaludes and Darvon and coke and God knows what-all else and wound up in Silver Lake Citizens Service House with the rest of this bunch of casualties.

Mattison is a former casualty himself, w[illegible]nce had carried a very serious boozing jones on his back that had a [illegible]vy negative impact on his professional performance as a studio carpenter and extremely debilitating effects on his driving skills. His drinking also led him to be overly free with his fists, not a wise idea for a man of his size and strength, because

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he tended to inflict a lot of damage and that ultimately involved an unfortunate amount of legal expense, not to mention frequent and troublesome judicial chastisement. But all of that is behind him now. Mattison, who is twenty-eight years old, single, good-natured, and reasonably intelligent, is well along in recovery. For the past eighteen months he has been not just an inmate but also a staffer here at Silver Lake, gradually making the transition from victim of his own lousy impulse control to guardian of the less fortunate, an inspiration to those who seek to pull themselves up out of the mud as he has done.

Various of the less fortunate are trickling into the room right now. Official wake-up time at Silver Lake Citizens Service House is half past six, and you are expected to be down for breakfast by seven, a rule that nearly everybody observes, since breakfast ceases to be available beyond 7:30, no exceptions made. Mattison himself is up at five every morning because getting up unnaturally early is a self-inflicted part of his recovery regime, and Nicky Herzog is usually out of his room well before the required wake-up hour because perpetual insomnia has turned out to be an accidental facet of his recovery program, but most of the others are reluctant awakeners at best. Some would probably never get out of bed at all, except for the buddy-point system in effect at the house, where you get little bonus goodies for seeing to it that your roommate who likes to sleep in doesn't get the chance to do it.

Mary Maude Gulliver is the first one in, followed by her sullen-faced roommate Annette Lopez, and after them, a bunch of rough beasts slouching toward breakfast, come Paul Foust, Herb Evans, Lenny Prochaska, Nadine Doheny, Marty Cobos, and Marcus Hawks. That's most of them, and the others will be along in two or three minutes. And, sure enough, here they come. That muscle-bound bozo Blazes McFlynn is the next one down—Mattison can hear him in the breakfast room razzing Herzog, who for some reason he likes to goof around with. "Good morning, you miserable little faggot," McFlynn says. "You fucking creep." Herzog sputters back, an angry, wildly obscene and flamboyant response. He's good with words, if nothing else. McFlynn drives Herzog nuts; he has been reprimanded a couple of times for the way he acts up when Herzog's around. Herzog is an edgy, unlikable man, but as far as Mattison knows he isn't any faggot. Quite the contrary, in fact.

Buck Randegger, slow and slouching and affable, appears next, and then voluminous Melissa Hornack, she of the six chins and hippopotamoid rump. Just two or three missing, now, and Mattison can hear them on the stairs. The current population of Silver Lake Citizens Service House is fourteen inmates and four full-time live-in staff. They occupy a spacious and comfortable old three-story sixteen-room house that supposedly was, once upon a time back around 1920 or 1930, the mansion of some important star of silent movies. The place was an even bigger

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wreck, up until five or six years ago, than its current inhabitants were themselves, but it has been nicely rehabilitated by its occupants since then as part of their Citizens Service obligation.

Mattison has long since had breakfast, but he usually goes into the dining room to sit with the inmates while they eat, just in case someone has awakened in a testy mood and needs to be taken down a notch or two. Since everybody here is suffering to a greater or lesser degree from withdrawal symptoms of some sort all the time, and even those who are mostly beyond the withdrawal stage are not beyond the nightmare-having stage, people can get disagreeably prickly, which is where Mattison's size is a considerable occupational asset.

But just as he rises now from the screen to follow the others in, a series of *pings* comes from it like church bells announcing Sunday morning services, and a little line of green dots spaced maybe six blocks apart springs up out in Arcadia, a few blocks east of Santa Anita Avenue from Duarte Road to Foothill Boulevard, and then curving northwestward, actually reaching beyond the 210 Freeway a little way in the direction of Pasadena. This is new. By and large the Zone's northwestern boundary has remained well south of Huntington Drive, with most of the thrust going down into the lower San Gabriel Valley, places like Monterey Park and Rosemead and South El Monte, but here it is suddenly jumping a couple of miles on the diagonal up the other way with lava popping up on the far side of Huntington, practically to the edge of the racetrack and the Arboretum and quite possibly cutting the 210 in half.

It's very bad news. Mattison doesn't need to wait for alarm bells to go off to know that. Everybody wants to believe that the Zone is going to remain confined to the hapless group of communities way out there at the eastern end of the Los Angeles Basin where the trouble started, but what everybody fears is that in fact it's going to keep right on marching unstoppably westward until it gets to the ocean, like a bad case of acne that starts on a teenager's left cheek and continues all the way to the ankles. They are doing a pretty good job of controlling the surface flows, but nobody is really sure about what's going on deep underground, and at this very minute it might be the case that angry rivers of magma are rolling toward Beverly Hills and Trousdale Estates and Pacific Palisades, and heading on out Malibu way to give the film stars one more lovely surprise when the fabulous new Pacific Coast Highway Volcano abruptly begins to poke its head up out of the surf. Of course, it's a long way from Arcadia to Malibu. But any new westward extension of the Zone, even just a couple of blocks, is a chilling indication that the process is far from over, indeed may only just have really begun.

Mattison turns toward the dining room and calls out, "You better eat fast, guys, because I think they're going to want us to suit up and get—"

And then the green dots on the screen sprout fluorescent yellow bor-

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ders and the alarm bell at the Silver Lake Citizens Service House starts going off.

What the alarm means is that whatever is happening out in Arcadia has proven to be a little too much for the local lava-control teams, and so they are beginning to call in the Citizens Service people as well. The whole idea of the Citizens Service Houses is that they are occupied by troubled citizens who have "volunteered" to do community service—any sort of service that may be required of them. A Citizens Service House is not quite a jail and not quite a recovery center, but it partakes of certain qualities of both institutions, and its inhabitants are people who have fucked up in one way or another and done injury not only to themselves but to their fellow citizens, injury for which they can make restitution by performing community service even while they are getting their screwed-up heads gradually screwed on the right way.

What had started out to involve a lot of trash-collecting along freeways, tree-pruning in the public parks, and similar necessary but essentially simple and non-life-threatening chores, has become a lot trickier ever since this volcano thing happened to Los Angeles. The volcano thing has accelerated all sorts of legal and social changes in the area, because flowing lava simply will not wait for the usual bullshit California legal processes to take their course. And so it was just a matter of two or three weeks after the Pomona eruption before the County Supervisors asked the Legislature to extend the Citizens Service Act to include lava control, and the bill passed both houses the next day. Whereupon the miscellaneous boozers, druggies, trank-gobblers, and other sad substance-muddled fuckupniks who inhabit the Citizens Service Houses now find themselves obliged to go out on the front lines at least three or four times a month, and sometimes more often than that, to toil alongside more respectable folk in the effort to keep the rampaging magmatic flow from extending the grip that it already holds over a significant chunk of the Southland.

It is up to the dispatchers at Volcano Central in Pasadena to decide when to call in the Citizens Service people. Volcano Central, which is an arm of the Cal Tech Seismological Laboratory with its headquarters on the grounds of Cal Tech's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in the hills north of town, monitors the whole Tectonic Zone with a broad array of ground-based sensors and satellite-mounted scanners, trying to keep track of events as the magma outcropping wanders around beneath the San Gabriel Valley, and if possible even to get a little ahead of things.

Every new outbreak, be it simply a puff of smoke rising from a new little fumarole or a full-scale barrage of tephra and volcanic bombs and red-hot lava pouring from some new mouth of Hell, is duly noted by JPL computers, which constantly update the myriad of data screens that have

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been set up all over town, like the one above Cal Mattison's desk in the community room of the Silver Lake Citizens Service House. It is also Volcano Central's responsibility, as master planners of the counteroffensive, to summon the appropriate kind of help. The Fire Department first, of course: that has by now been greatly expanded and reorganized on a region-wide basis (not without a lot of political in-fighting and general grief) and firefighters are called in according to a concentric-circles system that widens from the Zone itself out to, eventually, Santa Barbara and Laguna Beach. Their job, as usual, is to prevent destruction of property through the spreading of fires from impacted areas to surrounding neighborhoods. Volcano Central will next alert the National Guard divisions that have been put on permanent activation in the region; and when even the Guard has been stretched too thin by the emergency, the Citizens Service Houses people will be called out, along with other assorted civilian volunteer groups that have been trained in lava-containment techniques.

Mattison has no real way of finding out whether it's true, but he believes that the Silver Lake house gets called out at least twice as often as any of the other Citizens Service Houses he knows of. He may actually be right. The Silver Lake house is located in an opportune spot, practically in the shadow of the Golden State Freeway: it is an easy matter for its inhabitants, when summoned, to take that freeway to one interchange or another and zoom out via the Ventura Freeway to the top end of the Zone or the San Bernardino Freeway to the southern end, whereas anybody coming from the Mar Vista house or the one in West Hollywood or the Gardena place would have a much more extensive journey to make.

But it isn't just the proximity factor. Mattison likes to think that his particular bunch of rehabs are notably more effective on the lava line than the bozos from the other houses. They have their problems, sure, big problems; but somehow they pull themselves together when their asses are on the line out there, and Mattison is terrifically proud of them for that. It might also be that he himself is considered an asset by Volcano Central—his size, his air of authority, his achievement in having pulled himself up out of very deep shit indeed into his present quasi-respectability. But Mattison doesn't let himself dwell on that angle very much. He knows all too well that what you usually get from patting yourself on your own back is a dislocated shoulder.

The bell is ringing, anyway. So here they go again.

"Can we finish breakfast, at least?" Herzog wants to know.

Mattison glances at the screen. Seven or eight of those green-and-yellow dots are blinking there. He translates the cool abstractions of the screen into the probable inferno that has burst out just now in Arcadia and says, glancing at his watch, "Gulp down as much as you can in the next forty-five seconds. Then get your asses in motion and head toward

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the suiting room."

"Jesus Christ," somebody mutters, maybe Snow. "Forty-five fucking seconds, Matty?" But the others are smart enough to know not to waste any of those seconds bitching, and are shoveling the food down the hatch while Mattison is counting off the time. At the fifty-third second, for he is fundamentally a merciful man, he tells them that breakfast is over and they need to get to work.

The lava suits are stored downstairs, in a room off the main hallway that once might have been an elegant paneled library. The remains of the paneling are still there, rectangles of mahogany or some other fancy wood, but the panels are hard to see any more, because just about every square inch of the room is packed with brightly gleaming lava suits, standing upright elbow to elbow and wall to wall like a silent congregation of robots awaiting activation.

What the suits are, essentially, is one-person body-tanks, solid sturdy shells of highly reflective melnar that are equipped with tractor treads, shovel appendages, laser knives, and all sorts of other auxiliary gadgetry. Factories in Wichita and Atlanta work twenty-four hours a day turning them out, nowadays, with the Federal Government paying the not insignificant expense as part of the whole ongoing disaster relief program that Los Angeles's latest and most spectacular catastrophe has engendered. Mattison sometimes wonders why it was considered worthwhile to keep fifteen or twenty of these extremely costly suits standing around idle much of the time at each of the Citizens Service Houses, when it would be ever so much more efficient for the suits to be stored at some central warehouse at the edge of the Zone, where they could be handed out each day to that day's operating crew. But that is a question he has never bothered to raise with anybody, because he knows that the Federal Government likes to operate in mysterious ways beyond the capacity of mere mortals to comprehend; and, anyway, the suits have been bought and paid for and are here already.

They come in two sizes, bulky and bulkier. Mattison hauls the three nearest suits out into the hallway and hands them to people of the appropriate size, which creates space for the others to go into the storage room and select their own suits for themselves. As usual, there is plenty of jostling and bumping, and some complaining, too. Herb Evans is just barely big enough for the bigger size suit, and might be better off with the smaller one, in which he could move about less awkwardly; but he always wants one of the big ones, and the one he has grabbed right now has also been grabbed from the other side by Marcus Hawks, who is six feet two and has a better claim to it. "I got it first," Evans is yelling. Hawks, not letting go, says, "You go get one that's the right size for you, you little dumb fucker," and Mattison sees immediately that they both are prepared to defend their positions with extensive disputatory zeal, perhaps

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for the next three or four hours. He isn't surprised: the denizens of Citizens Service Houses are not, as a rule, gifted with a lot of common sense, but they often make up for that by being extremely argumentative and vindictive. There's no time to let Evans and Hawkins sort things out; Mattison strides between them, gently but firmly detaches Evans's grip from one arm of the suit and Hawkins's from the other, and sends the two of them in opposite directions to find different suits entirely. He takes the big one for himself and moves out in the hallway with it so that he can get himself into it.

"As soon as you have your suits on," Mattison bellows, "head on out into the street and get on board the truck, fast as you can!"

He squeezes into his own with difficulty. In truth he's a little too big even for the big size, about an inch too tall and two or three inches too broad in the shoulders, but by scrunching himself together somewhat he can manage it, more or less. He has to. There's no way he can stay behind when the Silver Lake House gets called out on lava duty, and he doesn't know any tailors who do alterations on lava suits.

The big olive-green military transport truck that is always parked now in readiness outside the house has let its tailgate down, and, one by one, the suited-up lava fighters go rolling up the slope into the truck and take their positions on the open back deck. Mattison waits in the street until everybody is on board who's going on board, twelve of the fourteen residents—Jim Robey, who is coming slowly back from the brink of cirrhosis, is much too freaky-jittery to be sent out onto the lava front, and Melissa Hornack is disqualified by virtue of her extreme obesity—and two of the four staffers, Ned Eisenstein, the house paramedic, and Barry Gibbons, the cook, who does not suit up because he is the one who drives the truck, and you can't drive a truck when you're wearing a thing that's like a small tank. The remaining member of the staff is Donna DiStefano, the actual director of the house, who would love to go along but is required by her official position to remain behind and look after Robey and Hornack.

"We're all set," Mattison tells Gibbons over his suit radio, and swings himself up onto the truck. And away they go, Zoneward bound.

Early as it is, the day is warming up fast, sixty degrees or so already, a gorgeously spring-like February morning, the air still reasonably clear as a result of the heavy rain a couple of nights before. This has been a particularly rainy winter, and Mattison often likes to play with the idea that one of these days it'll rain hard enough to douse the fucking volcanoes entirely, but he knows that that's impossible; the magma just keeps coming up and up out of the bowels of the earth no matter what the weather is like on top. A volcano isn't like a bonfire, after all.

The rains have made everything green, though. The hills are pure emerald, except where some humongous bougainvillea vine is setting off

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a gigantic blast of purple or orange. Because the prevailing winds this time of year blow from west to east, there's no coating of volcanic ash or other pyroclastic crap to be seen in this part of town, nor can you smell any of the noxious gases that the million fumaroles of the Zone are putting forth; all such garbage gets carried the other way, turning the world black and nauseating from San Gabriel out to San Berdoo and Riverside.

What you can see, though, is the distant plume of smoke that rises from the summit of Mount Pomona, which is what the main cone seems to have been named. The mountain itself, which straddles two freeways, obliterating both and a good deal more besides, in a little place called City of Industry just southwest of Pomona proper, isn't visible, not from here—it's only a couple of thousand feet high, after six months of building itself up out of its own accumulation of ejected debris. But the column of steam and fine ash that emerges from it is maybe five times higher than that, and can be seen far and wide all over the Basin, except perhaps in West L.A. and Santa Monica, where none of this can be seen or smelled and all they know of the whole volcano thing, probably, is what they read in the *Times* or see on the television news.

As the truck heads east along the Ventura, though, signs of the disaster begin to show up as early as Glendale, and by the time they have crossed over to the 210 Freeway and are moving through Pasadena there can be no doubt that something out of the ordinary has been going on lately a little further ahead. Everything from about Fair Oaks Avenue eastward is sooty from a light coating of fine pumice and volcanic ash that has been carried out of the Zone by occasional blasts of Santa Ana winds, and beyond Lake Avenue the whole area is downright filthy. Mattison—who is a native Angeleno, having grown up in Northridge and Van Nuys and lived for most of his adult life in a succession of furnished apartments in West Los Angeles—thinks of the impeccable mansions just to his right over in San Marino, with their manicured lawns and their blooming camellias and azaleas and aloes, and shakes his head at the thought of the way they must look now. He can remember one epic bender that began in Santa Monica and ended up around here in which he found himself climbing over the wall at three in the morning into the enormous sprawling garden of giant cactus at the Huntington Library, right down there in San Marino, and wandering around inside thinking that he had been transported to some other planet. It must look like Mars in there for sure these days, he thinks.

At Sierra Madre Boulevard the truck exits the freeway. "It's blocked by a pile of lava bombs just beyond San Gabriel Boulevard," Gibbons explains to him via the suit radio. "They hope to have it cleared by this afternoon." He goes zigging and zagging in a southeasterly way on surface streets through Pasadena until they get to Huntington Drive, which

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takes them past Santa Anita Racetrack and brings them smack up into a National Guard roadblock a couple of blocks just beyond.

The Guardsmen, seeing a truckload of mirror-bright lava suits, wave them on through. Gibbons, who is undoubtedly getting his driving instructions now direct from Volcano Central, turns left on North Second Avenue, right on Colorado Boulevard, and brings the truck to a halt a little way down the street, where half a block of one-story commercial buildings is engulfed in flame and red gouts of lava are welling up out of what had until five or six hours ago been a burrito shop. The site is cordoned off, but just beyond the cordon a bunch of people, Mexicans, some Chinese, maybe a few Koreans, are standing around weeping and wailing and waving their arms toward heaven—the proprietors, most likely, of the small businesses that are getting destroyed here.

"Everybody out," Mattison orders, as the tailgate goes down.

Firefighters are already at work at the periphery of the scene, hosing down the burning buildings in the hope of containing the blaze before it sets the whole neighborhood on fire. But the lava outcropping has been left for Mattison and his crew to handle. Lava containment is a new and special art, which the Citizens Service House people have gradually come to master, and the beleaguered Fire Department guys are quite content to turn that kind of work over to them and concentrate on putting out conventional fires.

Quickly Mattison sizes up the picture. Things are just in the very early stages, he sees. There's still hope for containment.

What has happened here is that a stray arm of the underlying magma belt that is causing this whole mess has wandered up through the bedrock and has broken through the surface in eight or nine places along a diagonal line a couple of miles long. It's as if a many-headed serpent made of fiery-hot lava has poked all its heads up at the same time.

For just one volcano to have sprung up out here would have been bad enough. But the area now known as the San Gabriel Valley Tectonic Zone has been favored, over the past year or so, with a whole multitude of them—little ones, but lots. The Mexicans call the Zone *La Mesa de los Hornitos*—that means "little ovens," *hornitos*. You can cook your tortillas on the sidewalk anywhere in the affected area.

The lava pool here is maybe eleven feet by fifteen, a puddle, really, just enough to take out the burrito joint. The heat it's giving off is, of course, fantastic: Mattison, who has become an expert in such things by this time, can tell just at a glance that things are running about 2000 degrees Fahrenheit. Lava at that temperature glows yellowish-red. He prefers to work with it glowing bright-red, which is about 400 degrees cooler, or, even better, dark blood-red, 400 degrees cooler than that; but he is not given his choice of temperatures in these situations, and at least they are not yet into the white-heat stage, which is a bitch and a half to cope with.

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It is the heat of the lava, and not any fire from below, that has set the adjoining buildings ablaze. Volcanoes, Mattison knows, don't belch fire. But you push a lot of red-hot material up into a street like this and nearby structures made mostly of beaverboard and plywood are very quickly going to reach their flash point.

The flow, so far, is moving relatively slowly, maybe ten or twelve inches a minute. That means the lava is relatively viscous, and thank God for that. He knows of flows that come spurting out fifty times as fast and make you really dance. At the upper surface where the lava is coming into contact with the air he can see it congealing, forming a glassy skin that tinkles and clinks and chimes as inexorable pressures from below keep cracking it. Mattison watches odd blobs and bulges come drifting up, expand, harden a little, and break, sending squiggles of molten lava off to either side. A few big bubbles are rising too, and they seem ominous and nasty, indicators, perhaps, that the lava pool is thinking of spitting a couple of little lava bombs at the onlookers.

The pumping truck that has been supplied for Mattison's crew this morning is strictly a minor-league item, but it appears adequate for the needs of the moment. The region has only so many of the big-ticket jobs available, just a handful, really, even after all these months since the crisis began, and those have to be kept in reserve for the truly dire eruptions. So what they have given him to work with, instead of a two-and-a-half-ton pump that can move thirteen thousand gallons of water a minute and throw it, if necessary, hundreds of feet in the air, is one of the compact Helgeson & Nordheim tripod-mounted jobs sitting on top of an ordinary flat-bed truck. It's small, but it'll probably do the job.

An auxiliary firefighter—a girl, couldn't be more than fifteen, Latino, dark eyes glossy with excitement and fear—has been delegated to show him where the water hookup is. Every one of the myriad little municipalities in and around the Zone is now under legal obligation to designate certain hydrants as dedicated lava-pump outlets, and to set up and maintain reserve water-tanks at ground level every six blocks. "How far are we from the nearest dedicated hydrant?" Mattison asks her, speaking like a space invader from within his lava suit, and she tells him that it's back behind them on North Second, maybe a thousand yards. Has he been provided with a thousand yards of hose? She thinks he has. Okay: maybe she's right. If not, the firemen can lend him some. Lava containment is considered a higher priority than fire containment, considering that uncontrolled lava flows will spread a fire even faster than burning buildings will, since burning buildings don't move through the streets and lava does.

Mattison picks Paul Foust and Nicky Herzog, who are two of the least befuddled of his people, to go with the girl from the Fire Department and set up the hose connection. Meanwhile he and Marcus Hawks and Lenny

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Prochaska get to work muscling the pump rig as close to the lava as they dare, while Clyde Snow, Mary Maude Gulliver, and Ned Eisenstein set about uncoiling the hundred yards of steel-jacketed hose that's connected to the pump and running it in the general direction of North Second Avenue, where the water will be coming from. The rest of his crew begins unreeling the lengths of conventional hose that they have, ordinary firehose that would melt if used close in, and laying it out beyond the reach of the steel-jacketed section.

Mattison can't help feel a burst of pride as he watches his charges go about their chores. They're nothing but a bunch of human detritus barely out of detox, as he once was too, and yet, goofy and obstinate and ornery and bewildered and generally objectionable as they are capable of being, they always seem to rise above themselves when they're out here on the lava line. Or most of the time, anyway. There are a few pissant troublemakers in the group and even the good ones have funny little relapses when you least expect or want them. But those are the exceptions; this kind of work is the rule. Good for them, he thinks. Good for us all. He's quietly proud of himself too, considering that a couple of years ago he was just one more big drunken unruly asshole like the rest of them, assiduously perfecting his boozing techniques in every bar along Wilshire from Barrington to Bundy to Centinela and so on clear out to the ocean, and here he is calmly and coolly and effectively running his own little piece of the grand and glorious Los Angeles lava-control operation.

"Can we maybe get a little closer, guys?" he asks Hawks and Lenny Prochaska.

"Jeez, Matty," Prochaska murmurs. "Feel the fucking heat! It's like walking into a blast furnace wearing a bathing suit."

"I know, I know," Mattison says. "But we'll be okay. Come on, now, guys. An inch at a time. Easy does it. We're good strong boys. We can handle a nice hot time, can't we?" It's like talking baby-talk, and Hawks and Prochaska are big men, nearly as big as he is and neither of them especially sweet-natured. But he has their number. Their various chemical dependencies had reduced them, in the fullness of time, to something that functioned on the general level of competence of babies in diapers, and they need to prove over and over, now, that they are the tough hard macho males they used to be. So they lean down close and work with him to drag the pump rig forward and get the nozzle aimed right down the mouth of the lava well.

The suits they're wearing are actually quite good at shielding them from the worst of the heat. They can withstand a surprising amount of it—for a time, anyway. The melnar is very tough stuff, and also, because it is so shiny, it turns back much of the heat through simple reflective radiation, and there's interior insulation besides, and a coolant network, and infrared filters, and two or three other gimmicks also, all of which

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makes it possible to walk right up to a 2000-degree lava flow and even, if its surface has hardened a little, to step out onto it when necessary. Still, despite the protection afforded by the lava suit, it is quite apparent from the warmth that does get through that they are standing right next to molten rock that has come spurting up just now from the Devil's own domain.

The hoses are hooked up now and Mattison has the nozzle directed to the place he wants it to be, which is along the outer rim of the lava flow. He sends a radio message back to Foust and Herzog out by the hydrant that they're almost ready to go. Then he gives a hand signal and it travels back and back along the line, from Mary Maude to Evans to Cobos to Buck Randegger, or whoever it is that is standing behind Cobos, and on around the corner until finally it reaches Foust and Herzog, who know for sure now that the hose line is fully connected, and the water begins to shoot forth. Mattison and Hawks and Prochaska grip the nozzle together, slowly and grimly playing it along the edge of the flow.

The purpose of this operation is to cool the front of the lava well sufficiently to form a crust, and then a dam, that will cause the continuing flow to pile up behind it instead of rolling on down the street. This is a technique that was perfected in Iceland, and indeed half a dozen grizzled Icelanders have been imported to serve as consultants during this Los Angeles event, frosty-eyed men with names like Svein Steingrimsson and Steingrim Sveinsson who look upon fighting volcanoes as some kind of Olympic sport. But one big difference between Iceland and Los Angeles is that Iceland sits in the middle of a frigid ocean that provides an infinite quantity of cold water for use by lava-fighters, and the distances from shore to volcano are not very great. Los Angeles has an ocean nearby too, but it isn't conveniently placed for hosing down lava outbreaks in the San Gabriel Valley, which is inland, at least thirty or forty miles from the coast. Hence the system of municipal water-tanks all along the borders of the Zone, and a zillion tanker trucks trundling back and forth bringing ocean water with which to keep the tanks filled, Los Angeles's regular water supply being far from adequate even for the ordinary needs of the community.

Any lava-cooling job, even a small one like this, is a ticklish thing. It isn't quite like watering a lawn. You are dumping 60-degree water on 2000-degree lava, an interaction which is going to produce immense billows of steam that will prevent you from seeing very much of what you are in the process of doing. But you need to see what you are doing, because as you build your lava dam along the front of the upwelling what you may all too easily achieve is not the containment of the lava but, rather, its deflection toward something you don't want it to hit. Like the fire truck down the block, for example, or some undamaged buildings on the opposite side of the street.

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So you have to wield your hose like a sculptor, dancing around squirting the water with great precision, topping up the dam here, minimizing its height there, all the while taking into account the slope of the ground, the ability of the subsoil to bear the weight of the new stone, and the possibility that the lava you are working with may suddenly decide to accelerate its rate of outflow from fifty feet an hour to, say, fifty feet a minute, which would send the flow hurtling over the top of your little dam and put you up to your ass in lava, with the hose still dangling from your hand as you become a permanent part of the landscape. Which is why the face-plate of your lava suit is equipped with infrared filters to help you see through all that billowing steam that you are busily creating as you work.

And there is other stuff to consider. Coming up out of the core of the earth, along with all that lava, are various gases, not all of them nice ones. Chlorine, sulfur dioxide, hydrogen sulfide, carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, all kinds of miasmas are likely to head swiftly surfaceward as though carried by a giant blowpipe. These are all poisonous gases, although you are more or less protected against that by your suit; however, traveling upward with the gases may be fragments of incandescent lava that will go up like a geyser and come down all over the neighborhood, including right where you happen to be. Therefore you want to listen, as you work, for strange new whooshings and bellowings and hissings, and in particular for the sound of something like an old-fashioned locomotive tooting its horn as it heads your way. Mattison has beaten a quick retreat more than a few times, sometimes taking his pump with him, sometimes abandoning it and running like hell as a highly local eruption starts nipping at his heels.

However, none of that happens this morning. This Arcadia thing is just a teeny-weeny little isolated lava outbreak with no special complications except for the owner of the burrito stand. Mattison, aided expertly by Marcus Hawks, who is just eight months out of a crack house in El Segundo, and Lenny Prochaska, whose powerful forearms bear needle tracks that look like freeway interchanges, deftly creates a low wall of cooled lava across the front of the outbreak, then adds a limb up the right-hand side and another up the left to form a U, after which they concentrate on hardening the new lava wherever it comes curling up over the boundaries of their wall. The cooling process is very quick. Along the face of the wall, the temperature of the lava has dropped to the 500-degree level, at which heat it is hardly glowing at all, at least not at the outer crust. Mattison figures that the crust he has built is maybe three inches thick, a skin of solid basalt over the hellish stuff behind.

Of course, lava is still oozing steadily from the ground at the original exit point, and probably will go on doing so for another six or seven hours at this site, maybe even a day or two. But the dam should hold it and

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keep it from welling out into Colorado Boulevard, which is an important thoroughfare that needs to be kept open. Instead, the lava will go on piling up on the site of the burrito stand, forming a little mountain perhaps fifteen or twenty feet high. Unless, of course, it decides to break through the surface a couple of dozen yards down the street instead, but Mattison doesn't think that's going to happen at this site.

He sometimes wonders what life is going to be like around here when all this is over, the volcanoes have died down, and the whole eastern half of the Los Angeles Basin is littered with new little mountains in the middle of what used to be busy neighborhoods. Are they going to dynamite them all? Build around them? On top of them? And where are they going to put the freeways to replace the ones that are now mired in cooling lava that soon will be solid rock?

Hell, it's not his problem. That's one of his mantras: *Not my problem.* He has enough problems of his own, currently under control but not necessarily going to stay that way if he borrows trouble from elsewhere. *One day at a time* is another phrase that he has been taught to repeat to himself whenever he starts worrying about things that shouldn't matter to him. *Easy does it.* Yes. *First things first.* These are absolutely right-on concepts. Somebody else will have to figure out how to repair Los Angeles, once all this is over. His job, which will last him the rest of his life, is figuring out how to operate Cal Mattison.

The fires in the surrounding buildings are just about out, now. One of the firefighters comes over and asks him how he's doing. "Under control," Mattison tells them. "Just a little tidying-up to do."

"You want us to stick around, just in case?"

Mattison thinks for a moment. "You got work nearby?"

The firefighter points. "There's a whole line of these things, from the freeway all the way down to Duarte. If you don't think the lava's going to pop, we can move on south of here. There's a bad one going on on Duarte, just at the Monrovia line."

"Go on, then," Mattison says. "We get any problems, I'll call you back in."

Real executive decision-making. He feels good about that. Time was when he never wanted to be the one who made the call about anything.

But he's confident of his own judgment right here and now. This job has been handled well. There's a high in that that feels like half a fifth of Crown Royal traveling through his veins, smooth and fine and warm.

The firefighters go away, leaving just two of their number posted as supervisors during the wrap-up and report-filing phase of the job here, and Mattison, signaling back down the line to have the hose shut down, moves forward onto the lava dam. It can be walked on, now, at least by someone equipped with tractor treads like his. He tests the crinkly new skin. It holds. Dainty little tinkling sounds are coming from it, the sounds

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of continued cooling and hardening, but it supports his weight. It's a little like walking on thin new ice, except that what is behind the fragile surface is molten rock instead of chilly water, and if he falls through he will be very sorry, though not for long. But he doesn't expect to fall through, or he wouldn't be up here.

Mattison isn't walking around on the dam just to show off. He needs to check out the fine points of the construction job. The dam slopes up and back at a 45-degree angle, and he wants its lip to rise just a little steeper even than that, so he moves along the face of the front, using his suit's shovel appendage to trim and shape the boundary between new rock and hot lava. He can feel mild warmth, not much more than that, through his suit, at least until he reaches a place where red can be seen crackling through the black, a tiny fissure in the dam, not dangerous but offensive to his sense of craft. He steps back, radios Foust and Herzog to turn the water back on, and has Hawks and Prochaska give the fissure a squirt or two.

Then he checks the far side of the lava front to make sure that there's no likelihood that the top of the lava dome he has created is simply going to spill back the other way, down into the residential block behind the event. But no, no, the oozing lava is quietly piling itself up, filling in behind the dam, giving no indication that it means to go off in some new direction. Thank God for that much. Because of the way the magma pool lies in relation to the giant subterranean fault line that kicked this whole thing off, the surface flows tend to be consistently directional, rising on a diagonal out of the ground and moving, generally, from east to west only. With some residual slopping around—lava is a liquid, after all—but not, as a rule, with any unpredictable twisting and turning back the way they have just come. Except, of course, when a badly thought-out dam is slapped in its path. But Mattison tries to think his work out properly.

Just as Mattison is wrapping everything up, Gibbons radios him from the truck to say, "They want us to move along to San Dimas when we're done here."

"Jesus," Mattison says. "San Dimas is way the hell to the east. Isn't everything over and done with back there by now?"

"Apparently not. Something new is about to bust out, it seems."

"Tell them we'll need a lunch break first."

"They said they wanted us to—"

"Right," says Mattison. "We aren't fucking soldiers, you know. We're volunteer citizens and some of us have been working like coolies out here all morning. We get a lunch break before we start busting our asses again today. Tell them that, Barry."

"Well—"

"Tell them."

* * *

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As Mattison has guessed, the San Dimas thing is serious but not catastrophic, at least not yet. The preliminary signs indicate a bad bust-out is on the way out there, and auxiliary crews are being pulled in as available, but one team more or less won't make any big difference in the next hour. They get the lunch break.

Lunch is sandwiches and soft drinks, half a block back from the event site. They get out of their suits, leaving them standing open in the street like discarded skins, and eat sitting down at the edge of the curb. "I sure wouldn't mind a beer right now," Evans says, and Hawks says, "Why don't you wish up a bottle of fucking champagne, while you're wishing things up? Don't cost no more than beer, if it's just wishes."

"I never liked champagne," Paul Foust says. "For me it was always cognac. Cour-voy-zee-ay, that was for me." He smacks his lips. "I can practically taste it now. That terrific grapey taste hitting your tongue—that smooth flow, right down your gullet to your gut—"

"Knock it off," says Mattison. This nitwit chatter is stirring things inside him that he would prefer not to have stirred.

"You never stop wanting it," Foust tells him.

"Yes. Yes, I know that, you dumb fucker. Don't you think I know that? Knock it off."

"Can we talk about smoking stuff, then?" Marty Cobos asks.

"And how about needles, too?" says Mary Maude Gulliver, who used to sell herself on Hollywood Boulevard to keep herself in nose candy. "Let's talk about needles too."

"Shut your fucking mouth, you goddamn whore," Lenny Prochaska says. He pronounces it *hooer*. "What do you need to play around with my head for?"

"Why, did you have some kind of habit?" Mary Maude asks him sweetly.

"You hooer, I'm going to throw you into the lava," Prochaska says, getting up and heading toward her. Mary Maude weighs about ninety pounds, beefy Prochaska maybe two-fifty. He could do it with one flip of his wrist.

"Lenny," Mattison says warningly.

"Tell her to leave me be, then."

"All of you," says Mattison. "Leave each other be. Jesus Christ, you think it's any easier for the others than it was for you?"

It is the tension, he knows, of the morning's work that is doing this to them. They're all on the edge, all the time, of falling back into their individual hells, and that keeps them constantly keyed up to a point where it doesn't take much for them to get on each other's nerves. Of course, Mattison's on the edge himself, he always will be and won't ever let himself forget it, but he is in recovery and they aren't, not really, not yet, and the edge is thinner for them than it is for him. Each of them has managed to reach the abstinence level, at least, but you can get to that point simply

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by having yourself chained to a bed; that keeps you out of the clutches of your habit but it doesn't exactly qualify you as being free of it. Real recovery comes later, if at all, and you can be a tremendous pain in the ass while you're trying to attain it, because you're angry just about all the time, angry with yourself for having burdened yourself with your habit and even angrier with the world for wanting you to give it up, and the anger keeps bubbling out all the time. Like lava, sort of. Makes a mess for everybody, especially yourself, until you understand, really and truly understand in your bones, that until *you* want to give it up, nothing's going to happen.

They calm down, though, as the sandwiches hit their bellies. Mattison waits until they've eaten before he springs the San Dimas thing on them, and to his surprise there is no enormous amount of griping. The usual grumblers—Evans, Snow, Blazes McFlynn—do the expectable amount of grumbling, but not a whole lot, and that's it. They all would rather go back to the house and watch television, of course, but somewhere deep down they know that this volcano business is *actual worthwhile and important stuff,* perhaps the first time in their lives they have ever done anything even remotely worthwhile and important, and some part of them is tickled pink to be out here on the lava frontier. Hollywood is just a dozen miles west of here, after all. They all see themselves as characters in the big volcano movie, heroes and heroines, riding into battle against the evil monster that's eating L.A. That's how Mattison himself feels when he's out here, and he knows it's the same for them, maybe even more intense than it is for him, because he also has the self-esteem that comes from having made it back out of his addiction to this level of recovery, and they don't. Not yet. So they need to be heroes in a movie to feel good about themselves.

They clean up the lunch mess and Mattison goes back to check his lava dam, which is holding good and true, and then off they go to San Dimas for whatever is to be required of them there.

To get there they have to travel through the heart of the Zone, the very belly of the beast, the place where it all started.

No. Where it all started was fifty or sixty miles down in the crust of the earth, and maybe fifty miles east of where Mattison and his pals are now: out in Riverside County, where the tremendous but hitherto unknown Lower Yucaipa Fault had chosen to release its accumulated tension about sixteen months ago, sending a powerful shock wave surfaceward that went lalloping through the Southland at a nifty 7.6 on the Richter. The earthquake made a serious mess out of Riverside, Redlands, San Bernardino, and a lot of other places out there in the eastern boondocks, and caused troubles of lesser but not inconsiderable degree as far west as Thousand Oaks and the Simi Valley.

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Californians don't enjoy big earthquakes, but they do expect and understand them, and they know that after you get one you wait for the lights to come back on and then you sweep up the broken crockery and you call all your friends in the affected area as soon as the phones are working so that, ostensibly, you can find out if they are okay, but really so that you can trade horrendous earthquake stories, and sooner or later the supermarket will reopen and the freeway overpasses will be repaired and things will get back to normal.

But this one was a little different, because the Yucaipa thing had evidently been so severe a fracture that it had shattered the roof of a colossal and previously unsuspected pool of very deep subterranean gases that had been confined under high pressure for ten or twenty million years, and the gas, breaking loose like a genie that has been let out of a bottle, had taken hold of a whopping big column of molten magma that happened to be down there and pushed it toward daylight, causing it to come up right underneath the San Gabriel Valley, which is just a little way east of downtown L.A. You expect all kinds of troubles in L.A.—earthquakes, fires, stupid politics, air pollution, drought, deluges and mudslides, riots—but you don't seriously expect volcanoes, any more than you expect snow. Volcanoes are stuff for Hawaii or the Philippines, or southern Italy, or Mexico. But not here, thank you, God. We have our little problems, sure, but volcanoes are not included on the list.

Now the list is one item longer.

The first volcano—the only one, so far, that had built a real full-size volcano-style cone for itself—had popped up at that freeway interchange near Pomona, a couple of days after the big Yucaipa earthquake. First there was thunder, never a common thing in Southern California, and the ground began to shake, and then it began to puff up, making a blister two or three yards high that sent the freeway spilling into pieces as though King Kong's big brother had bashed it from below with his fist, and smoke and fine dust started to spurt from the ground. After which came a hissing that you could hear as far away as Long Beach, and showers of red-hot stones went flying into the air, a pretty good indication that this wasn't simply an aftershock of Yucaipa. Then came the noxious gases, a gust of blue haze that instantly killed half a dozen people who were standing around watching; and then a thick column of black ash decorated by flashes of lightning arose; and then, seven or eight hours later, the first lava flow began. The sky was bright as day all night long from the bursts of incandescent gas and molten rock that were coming forth. By the next morning there was a gray volcanic cone forty feet high sitting where the interchange had been.

If that had been all, well, you would watch it on the news for the next few nights, and then the Federal disaster teams would come in and the people in the neighborhood would be relocated and the *National Geo-*

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graphic would publish an article about the eruption, and somebody would start a class action suit complaining that the governor or the president or somebody had failed to give proper warning to home buyers that a volcano situation might develop in Pomona, and the religious crazies in Orange County would deliver sermons about sin and repentance, and after a while the impacted area would become a new tourist attraction, Pomona Volcanic National Park or something like that, and life would go on in the rest of Los Angeles as it always did once the latest catastrophe had turned into history.

But the Pomona thing was only the beginning.

That great column of magma, rolling upward from the depths of the earth on a long slant to the west, began breaking through in a lot of other places, bursting out like an attack of fiery pimples across a wide, vaguely triangular strip bracketed, roughly, on the east by the Orange Freeway, on the north by Las Tunas Drive and Arrow Highway, on the south by the Pomona Freeway, and on the west by San Gabriel Boulevard. Within the affected zone anything was likely to happen. Volcanic vents opened in completely random patterns. Lava flows the size of small creeks would crop up in people's garages, or in their living rooms. Fumaroles would sprout in a front lawn and fill a whole neighborhood with smoke and ash. Houses suddenly began to rise from the ground as subsurface bulges formed beneath them. A finger of fierce subterranean heat would whiz along a street and fry the roots of every tree and shrub in your garden without harming your house. All this would be accompanied by almost daily earthquakes—not big ones, just nerve-wracking little jiggles of 3.9 or 4.7 that drove you crazy with fear that something gigantic was getting ready to follow. Then things would be quiet for a couple of weeks; and then they would start again, worse than before.

Not all the lava events were trivial garage-sized ones. A few fissures as big as three blocks wide opened and sent broad sheets of molten matter rolling like rivers down main thoroughfares. That was when the Icelanders showed up to give advice about cooling the lava with hoses. Teams like Mattison's were called out to build lava dams, sometimes right across the middle of a big street, so that the flow would back up behind the new rock instead of continuing clear on into the towns to the west—or, perhaps, into Los Angeles proper, the city itself, still far away and untouched on the other side of the Golden State Freeway. The dams did the trick; but they had the unfortunate side effect of walling off the Zone behind ugly and impassable barriers of solid black basalt.

Today's route takes Mattison and Company on a grand tour of the entire Zone. Freeway travel is a joke in these parts once you get anywhere east of Rosemead Boulevard, and there are new lava-created dead ends all over the place on the surface streets, and so it takes real ingenuity, and a lot of backing and filling, to make a short trip like the one from Ar-

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cadia to San Dimas, which once would have been a quick buzz down the 210 Freeway. Now it's necessary to backtrack down Santa Anita around the new outbreaks on Duarte Road, and then to come up Myrtle in Monrovia to the 210, and take the freeway as far east as it goes before it gets plugged up by last month's uncleared lava, which is not very far down the road at all; and then comes a lot of cockeyed wandering this way and that on surface streets, north to south and north again, through such towns as Duarte and Azusa and Covina and Glendora, places that no Angeleno ordinarily would be going in a million years, in order to get to the equally unknown municipality of San Dimas, which is just a couple of hops away from Pomona.

The landscape becomes more and more hellish, the further east they go.

"*Look* at all this shit," Nicky Herzog keeps saying, over and over. "*Look* at it! This is fucking hopeless, you know? We all ought to give up and move to fucking Seattle."

"Rains all the time," says Paul Foust.

"You like lava better than rain? You like fucking black ashes falling from the sky?"

"We don't give up," Nadine Doheny says dreamily. "We keep on keeping on. We are grateful for everything we have."

"Grateful for the volcanoes," Herzog says, in wonder. "Grateful for the ashes. Is that what you think?"

"Leave her alone," Mattison warns him. Nadine's conversation is made up mostly of recovery mantras, and that bothers the flippant, sharp-tongued Herzog. But Doheny is right and Herzog, smart as he is, is wrong. We don't give up. We don't run away. We stand our ground and fight and fight and fight.

Still and all, the Zone looks awful and even after all this time he has not grown used to its hideousness. There are piles of ashes everywhere, making it seem as if a black snowfall had hit the area, and also, not quite as universally distributed but nevertheless impossible to overlook, little incrustations of cooled lava, clinging to houses and pavements like some sort of dark fungus. Light dustings of pumice drift on the breeze. The sky is white with accumulated smoke that today's winds have not yet been able to blow out toward Riverside. Where major fires have burned, whole blocks of rubble pockmark the scene.

The truck has to detour around all sorts of lesser obstacles: spatter cones, and small hills of tephra, lapilli and cinders and lava bombs and other forms of ejected volcanic junk, et cetera, et cetera. Occasionally they pass an active fumarole that's enthusiastically belching smoke. Around it, Mattison knows, are piles of dead bugs, ankle-deep, killed by gusts of live steam or poisonous vapors. The fumaroles are surrounded also by broad swaths of mud that somehow have been flung up around

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their rims, often quite colorful mud at that, green or pink or red from alum deposits, bright yellow where sulfur crystals abound. Sometimes the yellow is laced with streaks of orange or blue, and sometimes, where the mud is very blue, it is splotched in a highly decorative way by a crust of rich chestnut-brown.

"It's like fairyland, isn't it?" Mary Maude Gulliver cries out, suddenly. "It's like something out of Tolkien!"

"Crazy hooer," Lenny Prochaska mutters. "I'd like to give you a fairyland, you hooer."

Mattison shushes him. He smiles at Mary Maude. It's hard to see this place as a fairyland, all right, but Mary Maude is one of a kind. Give her credit for accentuating the positive, anyway.

Aside from the mineral incrustations in the mud, the Zone shows color where the ground itself has been cooked by the heat of some intense outbreak from below. That ranges from orange and brick red through bright cherry red to purple and black, with some lively streaks of blue. But this show of color is the only trace of what might be called beauty anywhere around. Every building is stained with mud and ash. There are hardly any live trees or garden plants to be seen, just blackened trunks with shriveled leaves still hanging from the branches.

There aren't many people still living in these neighborhoods. Most of those who could afford it have packed up all their worldly possessions and had them carted off to new homes outside the Zone and, in a good many cases, outside the state altogether. A lot of those at the very bottom of the income ladder have cleared out also, moving to the new Federal relocation camps that have been set up in downtown L.A., Valencia, Mojave, the Angeles National Forest, and anyplace else where there was no irate householders' association to take out an injunction against it. The remaining residents of the Zone, mainly, are the lower-middle-income people, the ones who haven't yet lost their houses but couldn't afford to hire moving companies and aren't quite poor enough to qualify for the camps. They are still squatting here, grimly guarding their meager homes against looters, and hoping against hope that the next round of lava outbreaks will happen on any street but their own.

Just how desperate some of these people are getting is something Mattison discovers when the truck's erratic route around the various obstacles takes it through a badly messed-up segment of a barrio somewhere between Azusa and Covina and they see some kind of pagan religious sacrifice under way in the middle of a four-way intersection, where the pavement has begun to bulge slightly and show signs of imminent buckling as gas pressure builds from below. Flat slabs of blue-black lava have been piled up in the crosswalk to form a sort of crude, ragged-edged altar that has been surrounded by boughs torn from nearby trees.

What is evidently a priest—but not any sort of Catholic priest; his dark

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face is painted with green and red stripes and he is wearing a brilliant Aztec-looking costume, bright feathers and strips of fur all over it—is standing atop the altar, grasping a gleaming butcher-knife in his hand. The altar is stained with blood, and more is about to be added to it, because two other men in less gaudy outfits than the priest's are at his side, holding forth to him a wildly fluttering chicken. Assorted pigs, sheep, and birds are lined up back of the altar, waiting their turn. In a wider circle around the site are perhaps fifty shabbily dressed men, women, and children, silent, stony-faced, holding hands and slowly, rhythmically stamping their feet.

The nature of the thing that is taking place here is utterly obvious right away to everyone aboard the Citizens Service House truck. Even so, it isn't always easy to believe the evidence of your eyes when you see something like this. Mattison stares in shock and disbelief, wondering whether they have slipped through some time-fault and have dropped down into an ancient era, primitive and barbaric. But no, no, prosaic evidence of the modern century can be seen on every side, lampposts, store fronts, billboards. It's just what's going on in the middle of the street that is so exceedingly strange.

"Holy fucking shit," Buck Randegger says. He's a former highway construction worker who has been substance-free about four months and is, much like this lava altar, still plenty rough around the edges. "I thought the fucking Mexicans in this town were supposed to be Christians, for Christ's sake."

"We are," Annette Perez tells him icily. "And also other things, when we have to be. Sometimes both at the same time." The butcher-knife descends in a fierce arc, the newly headless chicken flaps its wings insanely, the crowd of worshipers jumps up and down and cries out three times in a high-pitched ecstatic way, and Randegger expresses his disgust and amazement at the whole weird pagan scene with a maximum of pungency and a minimum of political correctness. For a moment it looks as though Perez is going to jump at him, and Mattison gets ready to intervene, but she simply shoots Randegger a black glare and says, "If this was your neighborhood, *carajo,* and you had a god, wouldn't you want to ask him to stop this shit?"

"With pigs? With sheep?"

"With whatever would do it," she says.

Gibbons, meanwhile, is backing the truck out of the intersection, since the assembled congregation now is staring at them as though their presence here is quite unwelcome and it seems manifestly not a good idea to try to drive any closer. Mattison, taking one last look over his shoulder, sees a small pig being led up the side of the altar. The truck swings left at the first corner, then takes the next right and right again, which brings it around to the far side of the site of the ceremony in the same moment as

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a little earthquake goes rippling through the vicinity, 3.5 or so, just enough to make the gaunt blackened palm trees that line the street start swaying. The worshipers in the intersection behind them glower and point at the truck as it reappears, and begin to scream and yell furiously and shake their fists, and then Mattison hears some popping sounds.

"Hit the gas," he tells Gibbons over his suit radio. "They're shooting at us."

Gibbons speeds up. The street ahead is carpeted with a layer of loose ash maybe two feet deep, but Gibbons ploughs through it anyway, sending up swirling black clouds that make everybody on the open deck close the face-plates of their suits in a hurry. Beyond the ash is a stretch of crunchy cinders and other sorts of tephra, so that they all grab hold of each other and hang on tight as the truck clanks and jounces onward, and then a little newly congealed lava in the road makes the ride even rougher; but after that the street turns normal again for a while and they can relax, as much relaxation as may be possible while you ride in an open truck through territory that no longer looks like just a suburb of Hell, but the Devil's own back yard.

There have been repeated outbreaks of tectonic activity here before, early on in the crisis—that much is obvious from the burned-out houses and the black crusts of old lava everywhere and the ashen landscape—but something new and big is apparently getting ready to happen. The sky here is dead white from thick upwellings of steam and sulfurous fumes, except where the fumes are coal black. Streaks of lightning keep jumping around and the ground trembles continuously, as if a non-stop earthquake is going on. The sidewalks are warped and bulging in many places and some little red tongues of lava can be seen beginning to ooze from cracks in the pavement. Every few minutes a dull distant boom can be heard, a muffled sound that definitely gets your attention, something like the fart of a dinosaur that might be sauntering around a few blocks away.

Three or four weary-looking fire crews and some Guardsmen are slowly taking up positions in the street and getting their gear into order; some of the biggest pumps Mattison has ever seen have already been hauled into place for the lava-cooling work; police helicopters are whirling overhead, booming down orders to whatever remaining population may still be living here to evacuate the area at once. It is a truly precarious scene. Mattison is ever so happy that he traded the horrors of substance abuse for the privilege of visiting places like this.

The same thing is occurring to some of his companions, evidently. Blazes McFlynn lays his hand on Mattison's right arm and says, "I didn't sign on for any goddamned suicide missions, Matty. Let me off this fucking truck right now."

"Let you off?" Mattison says mildly.

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"Fucking A. I want out, this very minute."

Mattison sighs. McFlynn always makes trouble, sooner or later: if only Mattison had known that this San Dimas operation was going to be tacked on to the day's outing, he probably would have opted to leave McFlynn behind at the outset. McFlynn is, of all goofy things, a bombed-out circus acrobat and pensioned-off movie stunt man, strong as a tow-truck winch, who over the course of time has found relief from stress in a whole smorgasbord of addictive substances and now—having very badly broken his leg while winning a moronic barroom bet that involved jumping off the top of a building, thereby acquiring a severe limp that makes it hard for him to practice either of his professions—draws generous compensation pay from a variety of governmental sources while undergoing one of his periodic spells of detoxification and Citizens Service. His first name is actually Gerard, but if you call him anything but Blazes he will react unpleasantly. He is the only man in the house whom Mattison in his pre-sober state would have felt any reticence about decking, for McFlynn, though some five inches shorter than Mattison, is probably just about as dangerous in a fight, gimpy leg and all.

"Are you saying," Mattison asks him once more, "that you don't want to take part in the current operation?"

"The whole street is going to blow any minute."

"Maybe so. That's why we're here, to get things under control if it does. You want to walk back from here to Silver Lake? You think you'll catch a bus, maybe, or phone for a cab? The option of your departing this operation simply does not exist at this moment, okay, McFlynn?" McFlynn tries to say something, but Mattison talks right over him, although keeping his voice mild, mild, mild, as he has been taught to do all the time when addressing the inmates, no matter what the provocation. "You find this work not to your liking, well, when you get your cowardly ass back to the house tonight you can tell Donna that you don't want to do volcano work any more, and she'll take you off the list. You aren't any fucking prisoner, you understand? You don't have to do this stuff against your will and in fact you are perfectly free, if you like, to pack up and leave the house tomorrow and go back to your favorite substance, for that matter. But not today. Today you work for me, and we work in San Dimas."

McFlynn, who surely was aware when he began complaining that this was where the discussion was going to end, is just starting to crank up a disgruntled and obscene capitulation when Gibbons says, over the radio from the truck cab, "Volcano Central wants us to start setting up the pump, Matty. Satellite scan says there's a lava bulge about to blow two blocks east of us down Bonita Avenue, which is the big street straight in front of us, and we're supposed to dam it up as soon as it comes our way." So they are going to be right on the front line, this time. Fine, Mattison thinks. Hot diggety damn.

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* * *

They all get off the truck, and seal up their suits, and set about getting ready to deal with the oncoming eruption.

Because the pump they will be using this time is a jumbo job, just about the biggest one Mattison has ever worked with, he designates not only Prochaska and Hawks, once again, for the pumping crew, but also Clyde Snow and Blazes McFlynn, who will be up front not only because he's strong but also because Mattison wants to keep a close eye on him. In any case Mattison's going to need all the muscle-power he can get when it becomes necessary to swing that big rig around to keep the shifting lava penned up. He puts the generally reliable Paul Foust in charge of the controls that operate the pump itself. The rest—Randegger, Eisenstein, Herzog, Evans, and the three women, Doheny and Perez and Gulliver—Mattison deploys at various points along the line to the standpipe, so that they can keep the hose from getting tangled and cope with any other interruptions to the flow of water that might arise.

Everybody is in place none too soon. Because just as the signal arrives from the rear that the water connection has been made, there comes an all too familiar bellowing and groaning from the next block, as though a giant with a bad bellyache is about to cut loose, and then Mattison hears five sharp heavy grunts in succession, oof oof oof oof oof, followed by an eerie crackling sound, and suddenly the air is full of fire.

It's like one of the Yellowstone geysers, except that what is being flung up is a lot of tiny bits of hot lava riding on a plume of bluish steam, and for a couple of moments it's impossible to see more than a few feet in front of your face-plate. Then there is one single booming sound, not muffled at all but sharp and hard, and the bluish geyser of steam in front of them triples or quadruples in height in about half a second, and the pavement ripples beneath their feet as though an earthquake has happened precisely in this spot. Mattison comprehends that there has been a terrific explosion a very short way down the block and they are all about to be hurled sky-high, or maybe are already on their way up to the stratosphere and just haven't had time to react yet.

But they aren't. What has happened is that an underground gas pocket has blown its head off, yes, but it has done it in one single clean *whoosh* and all the pent-up junk that is being released has taken off for Mars as a coherent unit, the steam and mud and lava bits and whatnot rising straight up and vanishing, clearing the air beautifully behind it. A couple of good-sized lava bombs go soaring past them, fizzing like fireworks, and come down with thick plopping thunks somewhere not far away, but they don't seem to do any damage; and then things are quiet, pretty much. The whole blurry geyser that was spewing straight up in front of them is gone, the ground they are standing on is still intact, and they can see again.

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Mattison has just about enough time to realize that he has survived the explosion when he registers the force of an inrush of cool air that's swooping in from all sides to fill the gap where the geyser had been. It isn't strong enough to knock anybody down, but it does make you want to brace yourself pretty good.

And then comes the heat; and after it, the lava flow.

The heat is awesome. Mattison's suit catches most of it, but enough of the surge gets through his insulation so that he has no doubt at all about its intensity. It is what he calls first-rush heat: the subterranean magma mass has been cooking whatever deposits of air have surrounded it down there, and all that hot air, having had no place to go, has gone on getting hotter and hotter. Now it all comes gleefully zooming out at once. Mattison recoils involuntarily as though he has been belted by an invisible fist, steadies himself, straightens up, looks around to check up on his companions. They're all okay.

The lava, having busted through the pavement at last, follows right on the heels of that hot blast. A glowing red-orange river of it, maybe two or three feet deep, flowing down the middle of the street, taking the line of least resistance between the buildings as it heads in their direction.

"Hose!" Mattison yells. "Pump! Hit it, you bozos, hit it right down front!"

The lava is moving faster than Mattison would prefer, but not so fast that they need to retreat, at least not yet. It's actually three separate streams, each runnel six to eight feet wide, traveling in parallel paths and occasionally overlapping in a braided flow before separating again. The surface of each flow is fairly viscous from its exposure to the cool air, darker than what's below and showing irregular bulges and lobes and puckerings, which break open now and then to reveal the bright red stuff that lies just underneath. Here and there, narrow arcs of dark congealed lava rise above the stream at sharp angles like sleek fins, making it seem as though lava sharks are swimming swiftly downstream through the fiery torrent.

As the water from their big nozzle hits the first onrush of the flow, a scum of cooling lava starts to form almost instantly atop the middle stream. The front of it begins to change color and texture, thickening and turning gray and wrinkled, like an elephant's hide.

"That's it!" Mattison tells his men. "Keep hitting it there! Smack in the middle, guys!"

The water boils right off, naturally, and within moments they are able to see nothing in front of them once again except a wall of steam. This is the most dangerous moment, Mattison knows: if the lava—pushed toward them by whatever giant fist of gas is shoving it from below—should suddenly increase its uptake velocity, he and his whole team could be engulfed by it before they knew what was happening to them. For the next

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few minutes they'll be fighting blind against the oncoming lava flow, with nothing to guide them about its speed and position but Mattison's own perceptions of fluctuations in its heat.

The heat, at the moment, is really something. Not as fierce as it had been in the first instant of the breakout, no, but powerful enough to tax the cooling systems of their lava suits practically to their limits. It feels like a solid wall, that heat: Mattison imagines that if he leaned forward against it, it would hold him up. But he knows that it won't; and he knows, also, that if things get much hotter they will have to back off.

What he is trying to do is to build log-shaped strips of solidified lava along the front of the row, perpendicular to the line of movement. These will slow its advance as the fresh stuff piles up behind them. Then he can raise the angle of the hoses and start pumping the water upward to form larger blocks of lava, which he will eventually link to create his dam. And in time he will have buried the live lava at its source, entombing it beneath a little mountain of newly created rock and thus throttling the upwelling altogether.

The theory is a nice one. But in practice there usually are problems, because the lava, unlike your average river, tends to advance at a speed that varies from moment to moment, and you can build a lovely little log-jam or even some good-sized retainer blocks and nevertheless a sudden fast-moving spurt of molten stuff will spill right over the top and head your way, and there is nothing you can do then but drop your hoses and run like hell, hoping that the lava isn't traveling faster than you are.

Or else, as Mattison knows all too well, your dam will work very effectively to halt the lava in its present path—thereby inducing it to take up a different path that will send it rolling off toward some still undamaged freeway or still unruined houses, or maybe pouring down a hillside into another community entirely. When you see something like that happening, you need to move your whole operation around at a 90-degree angle to itself and start building a second dam, not so easy to do when you are operating with two-ton pumps.

Here, just now, everything is going sweetly so far. It's a tough business because of the extreme heat, but they are holding their own and even managing to achieve something. They have been able to maintain themselves at a distance of about half a block from the front edge of the lava flow without the need to retreat, and Mattison can see, whenever the steam thins out a bit, that the color of the lava along the edge is beginning to turn from gray to a comforting black, the black of solid basalt. A pump crew from some other Citizens Service House has arrived, Mattison has been told, and is building a second lava dam on the opposite side of the breakout. The fire crews are at work in the adjacent blocks, hosing down the structures that were ignited by the initial geyser of lava fragments.

If visibility stays good, if the water supply holds out, if the pump doesn't

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break down, if the lava doesn't pull any velocity surprises, if some randomly escaping gobbet of hot rock doesn't go flying at them through the air and melt one of the hoses, if there isn't some new eruption right under their feet, or maybe an earthquake, if this, if that—well, then, maybe they'll be able to knock off in another hour or two and head back to the house for some well-earned rest.

Maybe.

But things are beginning to change a little, now. The lava is penned up nicely in the middle but the bulk of the flow has shifted to the right-hand stream and that one is gaining in depth and velocity. That brings up the ugly possibility that Mattison's dam is achieving diversion instead of containment, and is about to send the entire flow, which has been traveling thus far from west to east, off in a southerly direction.

Volcano Central is monitoring the whole thing by satellite, and somebody back there calls the problem to Mattison's attention via his suit radio about a fifteenth of a second after he discovers it for himself. "Start moving your equipment to the right side of your dam," Volcano Central says. "There's danger now that the lava will start rolling south down San Dimas Avenue into Bonelli County Park, where it'll take out the Puddingstone Reservoir, and maybe keep on going south until it cuts the San Bernardino Freeway in half on the far side of the park. A piece of the 210 Freeway will also be at risk down there."

The street and park names mean nothing to Mattison—he has never been anywhere near San Dimas before in his life—and he can form only a hazy picture of the specific geography from what Volcano Central is telling him. But all that matters is that there's a park, a reservoir, and an apparently undamaged stretch of freeway to the south of here, and his beautifully constructed lava dam has succeeded in tipping the flow toward those very things, and he has to hustle now to correct the situation.

"All right, everybody, listen up," he announces. "We're making a 90-degree shift in operations."

Easier said than done, of course. The hoses will have to be decoupled and dragged to new hydrants, the massive pump has to be swung around, the trajectory of the water stream has to be recalibrated—nor will the lava stand still while they are doing all these things. It's a challenge, but stuff like this is meat and potatoes to Mattison, the fundamental nutritive agent out of which his recovery is being built. He starts giving the orders; and his poor battered bedraggled team of ex-abusers, ex-homelesses, ex-burglars, ex-muggers, ex-whores, ex-this, ex-that, all of it bad, swings gamely into action, because this is part of *their* recovery too.

But in the middle of the process of moving the pump, Blazes McFlynn steps back, folds his arms across the chest of his lava suit, and says, "Coffee break."

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Mattison stares at him incredulously. "What the fuck did you say?"

"Time out, is what I said. You think it's a snap, hauling this monster around? I'm tired. I'm a crippled man, Matty. I got to sit down for a while and take a breather."

"The lava is changing direction. There's a park and a reservoir and a freeway in the path of danger now."

"So?" McFlynn says. "What's that mean to me?"

Mattison is so astonished that for a moment he can't speak. If this is a joke, it's a damn lousy one. He needs McFlynn badly, and McFlynn has to know that. Flabbergasted, Mattison gapes and gestures in helpless pantomime.

McFlynn says, "Not my park. Not my freeway. I don't even know where the fuck we are right now. But my bad leg is aching like a holy son of a bitch and I want to sit down and rest and that's that."

"I'll sit you down, all right," Mattison says, recovering his voice finally. "I'll sit you down inside a volcano, you obstreperous lazy son of a bitch. I'll drop you in on your head." He knows that he is not supposed to speak to the inmates this way, and that everybody else is listening in and someone is bound to talk and he will very likely be reprimanded later on by Donna, but he can't help himself. He doesn't pretend to be a saint and McFlynn's sudden rebellion has pissed him off *almost* to the breaking point. Almost. What he really would like to do now is put one hand under McFlynn's left armpit and one hand under the right one and pick him up and carry him to the lava and dangle his feet over the fiery-hot flow for a moment and then let go.

Very likely that is exactly what Mattison would have tried to do two years ago, if he and McFlynn had found themselves in this situation two years ago; but it is a measure of the progress he has been making that he merely fantasizes tossing McFlynn into the lava, now, instead of actually doing it. The fantasy is so vivid that for a dizzy moment he believes that he is actually doing it, and he gets a savage rush of glee from the mental spectacle of McFlynn disappearing, melting away as he goes under, into the blazing river of molten magma.

But actually doing it would be extremely poor procedural technique. And also McFlynn is not exactly a weakling and Mattison is aware that he might find himself involved in a non-trivial fight if he tries anything. Mattison has never lost a fight in his life, but it is some time since he has been in one, and he may be out of practice; and in any case there's no time now, with the lava about to overflow his dam, to fuck around getting into fights with people like Blazes McFlynn.

So what he does, instead, is turn his back on McFlynn, swallowing the rest of what he would like to say and do to him, and indicate to Prochaska, Hawks, and Snow, who have been watching the whole dispute in silence, that they will have to finish moving the pump without McFlynn's

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help. They all know what that means, that McFlynn has shafted them thoroughly by dumping his share of this tremendous job on their shoulders, and they are righteously angry. A certain amount of venting occurs, which Mattison decides it would be best to permit. Hawks tells McFlynn that he's a fucking goof-off and Prochaska says something guttural and probably highly uncomplimentary in what is probably Czech, and even Snow, not famous for hard work himself, gives McFlynn the hand-across-bent-forearm chop. McFlynn doesn't seem to give a damn. He replies to the whole bunch of them with an upthrust finger and a lazy, contemptuous smirk that makes Mattison think that the next event is going to be a crazy free-for-all; but no, no, they all ostentatiously turn their backs on him too and continue the job of guiding the pump toward its new position.

It's a miserably hard job. The pump is on a wheeled carriage, sure, but it isn't designed to be moved in an arc as narrow as this, and they really have to bust their humps to swing it into its new position. The men, clumsy within their bulky suits, grunt and groan and gasp as they bend and push. Mattison, who as the biggest and strongest of the group has taken up the key position, can feel things popping in his arms and shoulders as he puts his whole weight into the job. And all the while McFlynn stands to one side, watching.

The pump is more than halfway into place when McFlynn comes limping over as though he has graciously decided that he will join them in the work after all.

"Well, look who's here," says Hawks. "You fucking son of a bitch."

"Can I be of any assistance?" McFlynn says grandly.

He tries to take up a position against the side of the pump carriage between Hawks and Prochaska. Hawks turns squarely toward McFlynn and seems to be thinking about throwing a punch at him. Mattison, who has been worried about this possibility since McFlynn made his announcement, poises himself to step in, but Hawks gets his anger under control just in time. Muttering to himself, he turns back in Prochaska's direction. There is just enough room for McFlynn to shove his way in between Hawks and Mattison. He braces himself and puts his shoulder against the carriage, making a big show of throwing all his strength into the task.

"Hey, be careful not to strain yourself, now!" Mattison tells him.

"Fuck you, Matty," McFlynn says sulkily. "That's all I have to say, just fuck you."

"You're welcome," says Mattison, as with the aid of McFlynn's added strength they finally manage to finish swinging the big pump around and lock it on its track.

The men step back from it, wheezing, sucking in breath after their heavy exertions. But the incident isn't over. Prochaska goes up to

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McFlynn and says something else to him in the harsh language that Mattison assumes is Czech. McFlynn gives Prochaska the finger again. Maybe there's going to be a fight after all. No. They are content to glare, it seems. Mattison glances at McFlynn and sees, through the face-plate of his suit, that the expression on McFlynn's face has become unexpectedly complicated. He looks defiant but maybe just a little shamefaced too. An attack of conscience? A bit of guilt over his stupid dereliction kicking in at last, now that McFlynn realizes that he actually was needed badly just now and fucked everybody over by crapping out? Better late than never, Mattison figures.

Prochaska still isn't finished letting McFlynn know what he thinks of him, though: he throws in a couple of harsh new Slavic expletives, and McFlynn, who probably has no more of an idea of what Prochaska is saying to him than Mattison does, dourly gives him back some muttered threats salted with the standard Anglo-Saxonisms.

Things are starting to get a little out of hand, Mattison thinks. He needs to do something, although he's not sure what. But he has a lava flow to worry about, first.

The lava, in fact, is getting a little out of hand also. Not that it has started to flow in any serious way toward Whatchamacallit Park and Whozis Reservoir, not yet. A thin little eddy of it has begun to dribble off that way over the right-hand edge of Mattison's dam, but nothing significant. The main flow is still traveling from east to west. The real problem is that new flows are starting to emerge from the ground alongside the original source, and there are now six or seven streams instead of three. Red gleams are showing through the gray and black of the dam in a number of places, indicating that the hot new lava is finding its way between sections of the hardened stuff. That means that what is coming out now is thinner than before.

Thin lava moves faster than thick lava. Sometimes it can move *very* fast. The direction of the flow can get a little unpredictable, too.

The pump is in place in its new location and ready to start throwing water, but it needs to have the water, first. Mattison is still waiting for confirmation that the hoses behind him have been moved and hooked to different hydrants. He can see Nicky Herzog a short distance down one of the side streets to his right, kneeling next to a section of thick hose as he fumbles around with a connector.

"Are we okay?" Mattison asks him.

"Just about ready," Herzog replies. He straightens up and begins to give the hand signal indicating that the water line is completely set up. But suddenly Herzog seems to freeze in place, and starts swinging around jerkily in a very odd way, going from side to side from the waist up without moving his legs at all. Also he has begun flinging his arms

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rigidly above his head, one at a time, as though he is suddenly getting tickled by an electric current.

For a moment Mattison can't figure out what's going on. Then he sees that the rightmost lava stream, the one that had already begun to escape a little from the dam, has been joined by one of the newer and thinner streams and has greatly increased in volume and velocity. It has changed direction, too, and is running straight at Herzog in a great hurry, traveling at him in two prongs separated by a green Toyota utility van that somebody has abandoned in the middle of the street.

Herzog is in the direct line of the flow, and he knows it, and he is scared silly.

Mattison sees immediately that Herzog has a couple of choices that make some sense. He could go to his left, which would involve a slightly scary jump of about three feet over the lesser prong of the new lava stream, and take refuge in an alleyway that looks likely to be secure against the immediate trajectory of the stream because there are brick buildings on either side of it. Or he could simply turn around and run like hell down the street he's in, hoping to outleg the advancing flow, which is moving swiftly but maybe not quite as swiftly as he could manage to go. Both of these options have certain risks, but each of them holds out the possibility of survival, too.

Unfortunately Herzog, though a quick-witted enough fellow when it comes to sarcastic quips and insults, or to laying out a million-dollar story line for some movie-studio executive, is fundamentally a clueless little yutz as far as most normal aspects of life are concerned, and in his panic he makes a yutzy decision. Apparently Herzog perceives the Toyota as an island of safety in the middle of all this madness, and, breaking at last from his paralysis, he jumps the wrong way across a segment of the narrower lava stream and with a berserk outlay of energy pulls himself up onto the hood of the green van. From there he clambers desperately to the Toyota's roof and begins to emit a godawful frightened caterwauling, high-pitched and strident, like an automobile burglar alarm that won't turn off.

What he has achieved by this is to strand himself in the middle of the lava flow. Maybe he expects that Mattison will now call in a police helicopter to lower a rope ladder to him, the way they would do in a movie, but there are no helicopters in the vicinity just now, and the lava that surrounds the Toyota isn't any special effect, either: it's a fast-flowing stream of actual red-hot molten magma, a couple of thousand degrees in temperature, which is widening and widening and very soon will be lapping up against the Toyota's wheels on both sides. At that point the Toyota is going to melt right down into the lava stream and Nicky Herzog is going to die a quick but very unpleasant death.

Mattison doesn't like the idea of losing a member of his crew, even a

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shithead like Herzog. He knows that his crew is made up *entirely* of shitheads, himself included, and the fact that Herzog is a shithead does not invalidate him as a human being. Too much of the human race falls into the shithead category, Mattison realizes. If nobody in the world ever lifted a finger to save shitheads from their own shitheadedness, then almost everybody would be in trouble. He himself, as Mattison is only too thoroughly aware, would still be compulsively cruising the bars along Wilshire and waking up the next morning under somebody's carport in Venice or Santa Monica. So he resolved some time back, quite early in his sobriety, to do whatever he could to help the shitheads of the world overcome their shitheadedness, starting with himself but extending even unto the likes of McFlynn and Herzog.

Nevertheless, Mattison is helpless in this instance. He is cut off from Herzog now by the larger of the two lava flows and he doesn't see a damned thing that he can do by way of rescuing him in time. A couple of minutes ago, maybe, yes, but now there's no chance. Even with an armored suit on, he can't just wade through a stream of hot fresh lava. He is going to have to stand right where he is and watch Herzog melt.

All of this analysis, the sizing up of the somber situation and the arriving at the melancholy conclusion, has taken about 2.53 seconds. Roughly 1.42 seconds later, while Mattison is still glumly making his peace with the idea that Herzog is screwed, a lava-suited figure unexpectedly appears in the street where Herzog is trapped, emerging from the alleyway into which Herzog had failed to flee, and calls out, extending his arms to the terrified man on top of the van, "Jump! Jump!" And, when Herzog does nothing, yells again, angrily, "Come *on,* you prick, jump! I'll catch you!"

Mattison isn't sure at first who the man who has come out of the alleyway is. Everybody looks basically like everybody else inside a lava suit, and it's not too easy to distinguish one voice from another over the suit radios, either. Mattison glances around, taking a quick inventory of his crew. Hawks right here, yes, and Prochaska, yes—

Can it be Clyde Snow who is out there by the mouth of that alleyway? No. No. Snow is right over there, on the far side of the pump carriage. So it has to be Blazes McFlynn who at this very moment is standing almost at the edge of a diabolically hot stream of lava and stretching his arms out toward the gibbering and wailing Nicky Herzog. McFlynn, yes, who has found some sort of detour between the adjacent buildings and made his way as close to the Toyota as it is possible to get. Incredible, Mattison thinks. Incredible.

"Jump, will you, you nitwit faggot?" McFlynn roars once more. "I can't stay here the whole fucking day!"

And Herzog jumps.

He does it with the same grace and panache with which he has han-

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dled most other aspects of his life, coming down in McFlynn's approximate direction with his body bent in some crazy corkscrew position and his arms and legs flailing wildly. McFlynn manages to grab one arm and one leg as Herzog sails by him heading nose-first for the lava, and hangs on to him. But, slight as Herzog is, the force of his jump is so great and the angle of his descent is so cockeyed that the impact on McFlynn causes the bigger man to stagger and spin around and begin to topple. Mattison, watching in horror, comprehends at once that McFlynn is going to fall forward into the lava stream still holding Herzog in his arms, and both men are going to die.

McFlynn doesn't fall, though. He takes one ponderous lurching step forward, so that his left leg is no more than a few inches from the edge of the lava stream, and leans over bending almost double so that that leg accepts his full weight, and Herzog's weight as well. McFlynn's left leg, Mattison thinks, is the broken one, the one that is bent permanently outward after the seventy-nine-cent job of setting it that was done for him at the county hospital. McFlynn stands there leaning out and down for a very long moment, regaining his balance, adjusting to his burden, getting a better grip on Herzog. Then, straightening up and tilting himself backward, McFlynn pivots on his good leg and swings himself around in a hundred-and-eighty-degree arc and goes tottering off triumphantly into the alleyway with Nicky Herzog's inert form draped over his shoulder.

Mattison has never seen anything like it. Herzog can't weigh more than a hundred forty pounds, but the suit adds maybe fifty, sixty pounds more, and McFlynn, though six feet tall and stockily built, probably weighs two-ten tops. And has a gimpy leg, no bullshit there, a genuinely damaged limb on which he has just taken all of Herzog's weight as the little guy came plummeting down from that Toyota. It must have been some circus-acrobat trick that McFlynn used, Mattison decides, or else one of his stunt-man gimmicks, because there was no other way that he could have pulled the trick off. Mattison, big and strong as he is and with both his legs intact, doubts that even he would have been able to manage it.

McFlynn is coming around the far side of the pump carriage now, no longer carrying Herzog in his arms but simply dragging him along like a limp doll. McFlynn's face-plate is open and Mattison can see that his eyes are shining like a madman's—the adrenaline rush, no doubt—and his cheeks are flushed and glossy with sweat. It's the look of the hero coming back in glory from a tremendous victory. McFlynn's heroism is bullshit, Mattison knows: it's just the next scene in McFlynn's private movie. But you live out your movie long enough and it goes real on you. Herzog was going to get killed and, thanks to McFlynn, he wasn't. That's real.

"Here," McFlynn says, and dumps Herzog down practically at Matti-

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son's feet. "I thought the dumb asshole was going to wait forever to make the jump."

"Hey, nice going," Mattison says, grinning. He balls up his fist and clips McFlynn lightly on the forearm with it, a gesture of solidarity and companionship, one big man to another. McFlynn's face is aglow with the true redemptive gleam. That must have been why he did it, Mattison thinks: to cover over the business about refusing to help move the pump. Well, whatever. McFlynn is a total louse, a completely deplorable son of a bitch, but that was still a hell of a thing to have done. "I thought you had gone off on your coffee break," Mattison says.

"Fuck you, Matty," McFlynn tells him, and shambles away to one side.

Herzog is conscious, or approximately so, but he looks dazed. Mattison yanks his face-plate open, snaps his fingers in front of his nose, gets him to open his eyes.

"Go over to the truck and sit down," Mattison orders him. "Chill out for a while. Tell Ned Eisenstein I want him to check you out. You're off duty."

"Yeah," says Herzog vaguely. "Yeah. Yeah."

And give yourself a couple of good shots of bourbon to calm yourself down while you're at it, Mattison thinks, but of course does not say. Christ, he wouldn't mind a little of that himself, just now. It is, however, not an available option.

"All right," he says, looking around at Hawks, Prochaska, Snow, and a couple of the others, Foust and Nadine Doheny, who have come up from the rear lines to see what's going on. "Where were we, now?"

The hose line that Herzog had been supervising has been obliterated by the new lava stream, of course, and the Toyota van is up to its door-handles now in lava too. But there are other hose lines coming in from other streets, and they still have a dam to build before they can call it a day.

Mattison is getting a little tired, now, after all the stuff with McFlynn and then with Herzog, but he can feel himself starting to function on automatic pilot. Groggily but with complete confidence he gets the water running again, and cuts through another handy alley so that he can set up a second line of lava logs along the new front, about thirty feet south of the Toyota. It takes about fifteen minutes of fast maneuvers and fancy dancing to choke it off entirely.

Then he can devote his attention to building the larger dam, the one that will contain this whole mess and shove the lava back on itself before it does any more damage. Mattison plods back and forth almost like a sleepwalker, giving orders in an increasingly raspy voice, telling people to move hoses around and change the throwing angle of the pump, and they do what he says like sleepwalkers themselves. This has been a very

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long day. They don't usually do two jobs the same day, and Mattison means to have Donna DiStefano say something to the Citizens Service administrators when he gets back.

Big ragged-edged blocks of black stone are forming now all across the middle of the street and curving around toward the south where the runaway lava stream had been. So the thing is pretty well under control. By now another team of Citizens Service people has arrived, and Mattison figures that if he is as tired as he is, then the others in his crew, who don't have his superhuman physical endurance and are still hampered to some degree by the medical aftereffects of their recently overcome bad habits, must be about ready to drop. He tells Barry Gibbons that he would like him to request permission from Volcano Central to withdraw. It takes Gibbons about five minutes to get through—Volcano Central must be having one whacko busy day—but finally they okay the request.

"All right, guys," Mattison sings out. "That's it for today. Everybody back in the truck!"

They are silent, pretty much, on the way back. The San Dimas thing has been grueling for all of them. Mattison notices that Herzog is standing on one side of the truck and McFlynn on the other, facing in opposite directions. He wonders whether Herzog has had the good grace even to thank McFlynn for what he has done. Probably not. But Herzog is a shithead, after all.

For a long time Mattison can't stop thinking about that little episode. About McFlynn's perversity, mainly. Crapping out on the rest of the pump team in a key moment without any reason, nonchalantly stepping to one side and leaving Prochaska and Hawks and Snow to do the heavy hauling without him, even though he must have known that his strength was needed. And then, just as light-heartedly, running into that alleyway to risk his life for Herzog, a man whom he despises and loves to torment. It doesn't make a lot of sense. Mattison pokes around at it from this way and that, and still he doesn't have a clue to what might have been going on in McFlynn's mind in either case.

Possibly nothing was going on in there, he decides finally. Perhaps McFlynn's actions don't make any sense even to McFlynn.

McFlynn has been a resident in the house long enough to know that everybody is supposed to be a team player, and even if you don't want to be, you need to *pretend* to be. Letting the team down in the clutch is not a good way to ensure that you will get the help you need in your own time of need. On the other hand, there was no reason in the world why McFlynn had to do what he did for Herzog, except maybe that he was feeling sheepish about the pump-moving episode, and Mattison finds that a little hard to believe, McFlynn feeling sheepish about anything.

So maybe McFlynn is just an ornery, unpredictable guy who takes each moment as it comes. Maybe he felt like being a louse when they were

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moving the pump, and maybe he felt like being a hero when Herzog was about to die a horrible death. I don't know, Mattison thinks. That's cool. I don't know, and I hereby give myself permission not to know, and to hell with it. It isn't Mattison's job to get inside people's heads, anyway. He's not a shrink, just a live-in caregiver, still much too busy working on his own recovery to spend time fretting about the mysterious ways of his fellow mortals. He simply has to keep them from hurting themselves and each other while they're living in the house. So he gives up thinking about McFlynn and Herzog and turns his attention instead to what is going on all around them, which actually is a little on the weird side.

They are almost at the western periphery of the Zone, now, having retraced their route through Azusa and Covina, then through towns whose names Mattison doesn't even know—hell, most of these places look alike, anyway, and unless you see the signs at the boundaries you don't know where one ends and the next begins—and are approaching Temple City, San Gabriel, Alhambra, all those various flatland communities. Behind them, night is beginning to fall, it being past five o'clock and this being February. In the gathering darkness the new spurts of smoke atop far-off Mount Pomona are pretty spectacular, lit as they are by streaks of fiery red from whatever is going on inside that cone today. But also, a little to the south of the big volcano, something else seems to be happening, something odd, because a glaring cloud of blue-white light has arisen down there. Mattison doesn't remember seeing blue-white stuff before. Some new kind of explosion? Are they nuking the lava flow, maybe? It looks strange, anyway. He'll find out about it on the evening news, if they are. Or maybe he won't.

Booming noises come from the southeast. A lot of tectonic garbage seems to be going into the sky back there too; he sees small red lava particles glowing against the dusk, and dark clouds too, ash and pumice, no doubt, and probably some nice-sized lava bombs being tossed aloft. And they experience two small earthquakes as they're driving back, one while they're going up Fair Oaks in Pasadena, another fifteen minutes later just as they're about to get on the westbound Ventura Freeway. Nothing surprising about that; five or six little quakes a day are standard now, what with all that magma moving around under the San Gabriel Valley. But the two so close together are further signs that things are getting even livelier in the Zone just as Mattison and his crew are going off duty. Hoo boy, Mattison thinks. Hot times in Magma City.

It's beginning to rain a little, out here in Glendale where they are at the moment. Nothing big, just light sprinkles, enough to make the rush-hour traffic a little uglier but not to cause serious troubles. Mattison likes the rain. You get so little of it, ordinarily, in Los Angeles, eight or ten dry months at a time, sometimes, and right now, with everything that's going on behind him in the Zone, the rain seems sweet and pure, a holy

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blessing that's being scattered on the troubled land.

It's good to be going westward again, moving slowly through the evening commute toward what is still the normal, undamaged part of Los Angeles, toward the sprawling city he grew up in. What is happening back there in the Zone, the lava, the ash, the blue-white lights, all seems unreal to him. This doesn't. Down there to his left are the high-rise towers of downtown, and the clustering stack of freeways meeting and going off in every which way. And straight ahead lie all the familiar places of his own particular life, Studio City and Sherman Oaks and Van Nuys in this direction and Hollywood and Westwood and West L.A. in that one, and so on and on out to Santa Monica and Venice and Topanga and the Pacific Ocean.

If only they could drop a curtain across the face of the Zone, Mattison thinks. Or build a fifty-foot-high wall, and seal it off completely. But no, they can't do that, and the lava will keep on coming, won't it, crawling westward and westward and westward down there under the ground until one of these days it comes shooting up under Rodeo Drive or knocks the San Diego Freeway off its pegs. What the hell: we can only do what we can do, and the rest is up to God's mercy and wisdom, right? *Right?* Right.

They are practically back at the house, now.

The rain is getting worse. The sky ahead of them is starting to turn dark. The sky behind them is already black, except where the strange light of eruptions breaks through the night.

"McFlynn really pissed me off today," Mattison tells Donna DiStefano. "I entertained seriously hostile thoughts in his direction. In fact I had pretty strong fantasies about tossing him right into the lava. Truth, Donna."

The house director laughs. It's the famous Donna laugh, a big one, high up on the Richter scale. She is a tall, hefty woman with warm friendly eyes and a huge amount of dark curling hair going halfway down her back. Nothing ever upsets her. She is supposed to have been addicted to something or other very major, fifteen or twenty years back, but nobody knows the details.

"It's a temptation, isn't it?" she says. "What a pill he is, eh? Was that before or after the Herzog rescue?"

"Before. A long time before. He was bitching at me from lunchtime on." Mattison hasn't told her about the pump-moving incident. Probably he should; but he figures she already has heard about it, one way or another, and it isn't required of him to file report cards on every shitty thing the residents of the house do while he's looking after them. "There was another time, later in the day, when it would have given me great pleasure to dangle him face first into the vent. But I prayed for patience instead

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and God was kind to me, or else we'd have had some vacancies in the house tonight."

"Some?"

"McFlynn and me, because he'd be dead and I'd be in jail. And Herzog too, because McFlynn was the only one in a position to rescue him just then. But here we all are, safe and sound."

"Don't worry about it," DiStefano says. "You did good today, Matty."

Yes. He knows that that's true. He did good. Every day, in every way, inch by inch, he does his best. And he's grateful every hour of his life that things have worked out for him in such a way that he has had the opportunity. As if God has sent volcanoes to Los Angeles as a personal gift to him, part of the recovery program of Calvin Thomas Mattison, Jr.

There's nothing on that night's news about unusual stuff in the Zone this evening. Usual stuff, yes, plenty of that, getting the usual perfunctory coverage, fumaroles opening here, lava vents there, houses destroyed in this town and that and that, new street blockages, et cetera, et cetera. Maybe the blue-white light he saw was just a tremendous searchlight beam, celebrating the opening of some new shopping mall in Anaheim or Fullerton. This crazy town, you never can tell.

He goes upstairs—his little room, all his own. Reads for a while, thinks about his day, gets into bed. Sleeps like a baby. The alarm goes off at five, and he rises unprotestingly, showers, dresses, goes downstairs.

There are lights on all over the board. Blue for new fumaroles, here, here, and there, and another red one in the vicinity of Mount Pomona, and a whole epidemic of green dots announcing fresh lava cutting loose over what looks like the whole area, top to bottom. Mattison has never seen it look that bad. The crisis seems to be entering a new and very obnoxious phase. Volcano Central will be calling them out again today, sure as anything.

What the hell. We do what we can, and hope for the best, one day at a time.

He puts together some breakfast for himself and waits for the rest of the house to wake up. ●

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NOVEMBER 1995

10-12—**WindyCon.** For info, write: **Box 184, Palatine IL 60078.** Or phone: **(708) 383-6948** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Schaumburg IL (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Hyatt. Guests will include: P. Anderson, S. Schmidt, B. Longyear, D. L. Anderson, H. Bruton, D. & L. Smith, B. & A. Passovoy.

10-12—**OryCon. (503) 283-0802. E-mail: orycon17@ripcity.com.** Columbia River Red Lion, Portland OR.

10-12—**SciCon. (804) 595-9005 (days), 599-6309 (eves). Web: pinn.net/~michaela/.** Sheraton, Virginia Beach VA.

10-12—**Antares. (404) 873-4661.** Holiday Inn Central, Atlanta GA. Hambly, Strickland, Bruns, Hal Clement.

10-12—**Anime East. (908) 719-9770.** Hilton, East Brunswick NJ. Japanese animation & Asian pop culture meet.

10-12—**Mid-Atlantic Mystery Book Fair. (215) 923-0211.** Holiday Inn, 4th & Arch, Philadelphia PA. Mysteries.

11-12—**Creation. (818) 409-0960.** Pasadena CA. This is a commercial Star Trek/media/comics-oriented event.

17-19—**PhilCon. (215) 342-1672.** Adam's Mark, Philadelphia PA. Jack Williamson, Bob Eggleton, Connie Willis.

17-19—**SoonerCon. (405) 634-5442.** Medallion Hotel, Oklahoma City. S. & J. Robinson, artists Maitz and Wurts.

17-19—**The Leonard Nimoy Convention. (081) 842-3128.** Nottingham UK. Mr. Nimoy usually does not attend.

18-19—**HorizonCon. (818) 841-8735.** Convention Center, Austin TX. Star Trek backstager Lolita Fatjo.

18-19—***KlingKon. (510) 686-9319.*** *Holiday Inn Golden Gateway, San Francisco CA. Ansara, Campbell, Collicos.*

24-26—**LosCon, 11513 Burbank Blvd., N. Hollywood CA 91601. (919) 767-9234.** Hilton, Burbank CA. Bujold, Rusch.

24-26—**ConCat, 805 College St., Knoxville TN 37921. (615) 522-3470.** Radisson. Delany, Steele, Phillips, Webb.

24-26—**ChambanaCon, Box 2908, Springfield IL 62708. (217) 753-8934.** Chancellor, Champaign IL. Offutt, Tucker.

24-26—**Visions, Box 1202, Highland Park IL 60635. (708) 405-9461.** Hyatt O'Hare, Rosemont IL. British SF media.

24-26—**Virtual Futures, CRPL, Dept. of Philosophy, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK. (0203) 523-523.**

24-26—**Creation, 411 N. Cntrl. Av. #300, Glendale CA 91203. (818) 409-0960.** New York NY. Their big Eastern do.

24-26—**Fantasy Fair, Box 820488, Dallas TX 75382. (214) 350-4305.** Harvey Hotel. Comic-based commercial event.

DECEMBER 1995

29-Dec. 3—**NordCon, GKF, Box 76, Gdansk 80-325, Poland. (48 58) 531-073.** Annual meet of Polish SF clubs.

1-3—**NotJustAnotherCon, SCUM, RSO 16, UMass, Amherst MA 01003. (413) 545-1924.** Campus Center Hotel. Tarr.

1-3—**SMOFCon, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755.** Red Lion Hotel. Where con runners meet to talk shop.

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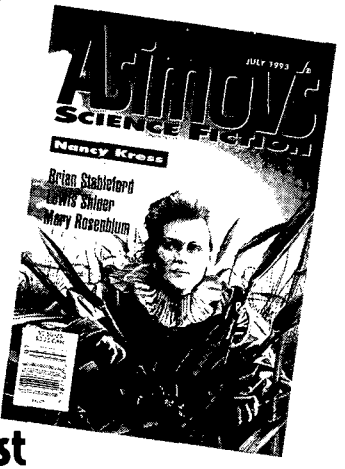

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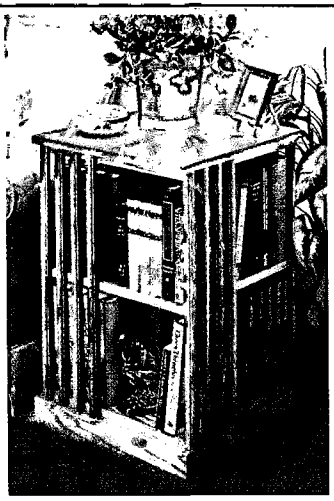

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